


SIR
POMPIEY
and
MADAMIE
JUNO



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SIR POMPEY AND MADAME JUNO

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THE BAZAAR

THE PUPPET SHOW ✓

THE GOAT & COMPASSES

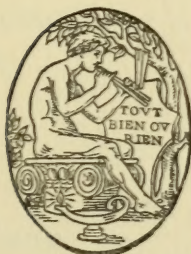
DESERT

SIR POMPEY
AND MADAME JUNO

and other Tales

by

MARTIN ARMSTRONG



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SIR POMPEY AND MADAME JUNO

SEA VIEW

MISS WITHERSPOON SHOOK A DUSTER FROM the open window of the double bedroom. Fluffy clots of dust floated away on the air like grey snowflakes: one of them, the largest, was suddenly caught by some fragment of breeze and whirled surprisingly upwards, higher and higher and out of sight. It was Saturday afternoon. She had just finished preparing the double room for the lodgers who were coming on Monday for a month. They would fill the house – the double room, the little bedroom at the back, and the sitting-room downstairs. Miss Witherspoon looked forward to their arrival with mixed feelings – pleasure at the prospect of the three guineas a week and whatever she might make out of the catering, and a vague discomfort at the thought that for a month she would cease to be mistress in her own house. They would loll on her chairs, turn back the tablecloth and put inkpots on the table, and sometimes even move the furniture and ornaments for all the world as if the place belonged to them. Secretly and resignedly Miss Witherspoon always resented the arrival of even the best of lodgers.

Sea View was a corner house. Its narrow front looked on a street that ran back, past shops and the Wesleyan Chapel, to the station; but the side

of the house, divided from the asphalt pavement by a little strip of garden, gave on a road that ran parallel with the sea and was screened from it by the houses opposite. It was on to this road that Miss Witherspoon looked now as she lingered at the bedroom window, the duster still in her hand. Then, pushing up the sash a little higher, she leaned out. The window, as she pushed it up, had given a shrill, aggressive neigh and attracted the attention of a middle-aged gentleman in white tennis-shoes who was walking past on the opposite side of the road – obviously a summer visitor. He glanced up, stared for a moment, and went on his way, fumbling in his mind for the description – the obvious description – of the impression he had just received: the shrill, mocking neigh, the square of open window, and the strange creature that had popped out of it. For Miss Witherspoon was strange, very strange to look upon with her long face halved by the solemn trunk-like nose and crowned by a rakish wigwam of hair which looked as if it had been elaborately dressed years ago for some dinner-party and never taken down again. Yes, strange beyond measure! At the turning of the road the middle-aged gentleman threw up his head with the gesture of one who has solved a problem – ‘Punch and Judy Show, by Gad!’

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‘Gentlemen alone are much the least trouble,’ Miss Witherspoon was reflecting as she gazed abstractedly after him. Then she glanced obliquely across to a gap in the row of houses opposite through which a narrow vertical slice of sea and seashore was visible, barely enough to justify the name of the house. That glimpse of the sea never failed to thrill her. Looking at it she inhaled the breath of freedom, the sense of an escape from her restricted life into a world larger and more serene. To-day the sea was ashen grey. Thin lines of white glided towards the shore and, farther out, white plumes danced upon the grey-ness – white horses, Miss Witherspoon called them. If only it was fine during the month they were here! The weather made all the difference when you had lodgers. Neither sea nor sky was very promising now, and she lowered her eyes to the little strip of white-railed garden immediately under the window. The garden was at its best: roses, flame-coloured snapdragons, and a great hedge of blue Canterbury bells. The cherry-tree by the gate was over long ago, of course: little pallid, indigestible cherries showed among the leaves. Togo, no longer at his best nowadays, sat on the little gravel path with his front paws tucked under him. His black fur was ruffled and brown at the edges like an old sealskin. Not

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exactly a credit to the house, poor dear! Miss Witherspoon could see his whiskers radiating straight and white on each side of his black head. It was to be hoped the new lodgers didn't mind cats. A sudden guffaw of laughter – young men's laughter – came from the corner of the house where the road turned down towards the station. There was always a group of young men standing there on Saturday afternoons and Sundays. Miss Witherspoon could see them from where she stood, on the footpath just beyond her privet hedge. They were chatting together as usual – what in the world did they find to talk about so much? – and the one who had laughed pivoted round on his heel, his hands in his trouser-pockets, as if driven round by the force of his laugh. Miss Witherspoon pulled down the window and, mechanically picking up a feather which lay, moulted from the eiderdown, on the varnished boards that edged the carpet, she went out of the room and downstairs to the kitchen, thinking wistfully of the young men. How remote they were from her again nowadays; far out of her reach; away in another world, although they stood every Saturday and Sunday two yards from the corner of Sea View. It was funny how things changed your outlook. The War, for instance! Before the War she had regarded young men as

her natural enemies. She was afraid of them and she hated them. The thought of them standing there on Saturdays and Sundays just outside her windows made her nervous, so that on these days she stayed indoors as much as possible. And surely they *were* different in those days – so rough and noisy and rude. She was always having trouble with them. If it wasn't one thing it was another. Either she would catch one grabbing, as he went past, at her cherry-tree and tearing off a cherry or two and a great bunch of leaves, or she would be annoyed by another looking over the fence and making atrocious noises at Togo in the garden. 'Leave the cat alone!' she would shout from the window, and the young man would slouch off with a final supreme caterwaul which, she felt, was intended not for Togo but for her. Once, happening to pass Piper, the police sergeant, near the church, she had stopped and asked if the young men couldn't be prevented from congregating just outside her house; but he had been disinclined to do anything, 'unless, of course,' he said, 'you can give some actual case – bad language, or obstruction of the public way, or damage to property.' Unfortunately, on that occasion, Miss Wither-spoon could make no specific complaint. They were just a nuisance, she said.

'Why, they're all right,' Piper had answered

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benignantly: 'not bad young fellows, most of them, Miss Witherspoon.'

Miss Witherspoon smiled to herself now as she recalled it. What a fuss she used to make about things in those days. And yet Piper was quite right: she was sure of it now. 'They couldn't really have been very different from the young men of nowadays. What a state she used to get in over those cherries. Once, when she had caught them stealing them on two successive days, she had determined to deal with the thing herself, and on the following Saturday she had marched boldly up to the group at the street corner.

'Which of you was it,' she said, 'that took my cherries?'

They all stopped talking and stared at her, half embarrassed and half amused.

'There's no good denying it,' she said. 'I saw you, on Wednesday and on Thursday too.'

Then a clumsy-looking youth grinned. 'Now Tommy, own up!' he said. 'There's no good trying to look innocent.'

Miss Witherspoon followed his glance. 'Which is . . . which is Thomas?' she asked in a voice that shook a little.

'Thomas' delighted them. 'Now, Thomas! Step up, Thomas!' The whole party clamoured

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for Thomas. Miss Witherspoon thought she detected him – a fat boy with blue eyes.

‘You!’ she said, taking a step forward.

‘No, not ’im!’ ‘The next!’ ‘No, the next!’ ‘To the left!’ ‘The one behind ’im!’ Every one was ready with directions.

Miss Witherspoon glanced helplessly from one to the other. She was trembling. Her small spark of courage was out. ‘Very well!’ she threatened in a final attempt at dignity. ‘I shall complain to the police.’

And for weeks after that she would hear them on Saturdays and Sundays outside her window:

‘Lend us your bike to-morrow, Joe?’ ‘I can’t.’ ‘Very well, I shall complain to the police.’

‘How’s Nellie Watson, Jack?’ ‘Mind your own business.’ ‘Very well, I shall complain to the police.’

‘Give us a light, Bob.’ ‘Haven’t got one.’ ‘Very well, I shall complain to the police.’

It became a nightmare. Even now Miss Witherspoon shrank into herself at the thought of it. Yes, she had found life difficult in those days, she reflected; like a cat living among a lot of dogs.

Then the War came; and with the coming of the War the young men gradually thinned away and soon there were none on Saturdays and Sundays standing at the corner of Sea View. It almost

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seemed as if Providence had stepped in where the police sergeant had refused to interfere. Miss Witherspoon was aware of a relief, a sense of freedom. Now she could go in and out of her house at any time, free from hostile and sarcastic observation.

And Miss Witherspoon went out and in now much more often than formerly. Life about her was transformed. Every one had become busy and very serious. There were meetings of all kinds to be attended – bandage-rolling parties, Red Cross classes, special services at the church, and soon all the business of ration tickets. Life for Miss Witherspoon became very much alive. It was really great fun.

Then a dreadful thing happened. A soldier called one day – a responsible person. Perhaps he was an officer, but Miss Witherspoon did not know how to distinguish an officer from a common soldier. He wanted billets.

‘Billets?’ Miss Witherspoon did not understand.

‘Well, accommodation, lodgings, for soldiers.’ He explained the customary arrangements.

Miss Witherspoon was appalled. But it was impossible, she explained. She lived alone. She couldn’t possibly have the house full of men. Besides, the work would be too much; and her rooms had been redecorated only this spring. No,

really: she was sorry. Her fear gave her a stubborn asperity that had more effect than she realized. The officer was lenient. He would see, he said, how the total accommodation available worked out, but he noted against her name and address that she had room for six, in case . . .

Six? Miss Witherspoon gasped. But three was the most she had room for. 'I've never had more than three lodgers,' she said, 'except once when they brought a baby.'

But the officer genially waved these ideas aside. 'It's not like peace time, you see. It's simply a matter of floor-space. Now you ' – he worked out a little sum in his notebook – 'could take six comfortably: eight at a pinch.'

Eight! Much the same as if the whole street-corner group had taken possession of her house. The mere thought of it ruined her peace of mind. But gradually at the bandage-rolling parties and the Red Cross classes it came out that one after another of her acquaintances had agreed to billet soldiers. Billets! Billeting! The strange new words were to be heard at every moment. They became for a while the most significant words in the language. Mrs. Coleman had no less than a dozen coming. 'Talk about sardines!' she exclaimed to Miss Witherspoon, throwing up her hands. 'Still, we must do what we can.'

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And in most of them, Miss Witherspoon discovered, apprehension was tempered by the sense of novelty and adventure and the wish to do what they could. In a day or two Miss Witherspoon herself had caught an exalted, almost reckless mood. She too, she felt, must do what she could for the War, and her mind began to face the probability of the six soldiers' arrival. She would have to be strict with them from the first: that was the only way. She had gone the wrong way to work with the young men at the street corner: that was how they had got the upper hand. She lifted her chin and squared her jaw as though the enemy was already on the scene.

Two days later, the billeting officer called again. Two battalions were coming. They were short of billets as it was. 'Very sorry, Miss . . . er . . . Miss Witherspoon. Four in the big bedroom: two in the small one.' And three hours later the soldiers arrived in the town.

She caught sight of them first from an upstairs window, a large party with an officer at the head of them marching down the road from the station. From time to time they halted and the officer detached a few men from the head of the column and directed them to their appointed billet. Then the rest of the party, diminished after each halt, moved on. When she heard them halt outside

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Sea View, Miss Witherspoon's heart leapt to her throat. From behind the curtain she watched the officer detach six men, send two back and call out two others, and as she hurried downstairs a loud rap sounded on the knocker. She braced herself for the ordeal and opened the door.

The officer was the same one as before. Behind him crowded red, sweating faces, khaki caps pushed far back, khaki shoulders laden with great square packs and the muzzles of rifles rising vertically a few inches to the right or left of each face.

'Miss Witherspoon, isn't it?' asked the officer, scanning his notebook. 'Here they are, Miss Witherspoon. Six. I've chosen quiet ones for you.'

The soldiers grinned — that same humorous grin which she always associated with the young men of the street corner. A wave of despair broke over her. But next moment the officer was gone and the soldiers were crowding in. Enormous fellows they seemed to her as she stood timidly holding the door open for them. Their nailed boots clattered like showers of heavy raindrops on her beautiful linoleum. They jostled one another in the narrow entrance, big-boned, clumsy, and made more clumsy still by the great packs on their backs. A strong fume of sweat and greased boot-leather hung about them. Miss Witherspoon

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could feel the heat given off by the bodies nearest to her.

‘Which way, Ma?’ asked the foremost one.

Miss Witherspoon drew herself up and issued orders in her most refined accent. ‘Upstairs. Four in the big room on the right: two in the room on the left.’

They tramped ponderously upstairs and then their footsteps seemed to spread all over the upper part of the house. They shouted to one another from room to room. ‘What-o! Struck lucky this time. Two beds in ’ere, Joe. ’Ow many there?’ ‘One. A little un.’ ‘*Some* billet, Stan!’ ‘What say?’ Then a babel of talk, footsteps, bumping and rattling of rifles and equipment. Miss Witherspoon stood in the kitchen, left hand to left cheek, listening. Her heart bled for her paint and varnish. Thank heaven she had put away all her sheets and pillow-cases, all cushions, ornaments, tablecloths – everything that *could* be put away.

Presently there were steps on the stairs and along the back passage, and two of them appeared in the doorway of the kitchen. They had taken off their caps, equipment, and tunics, and stood in their grey flannel shirts, open at the necks, the sleeves rolled up to the elbows.

‘Can you lend us a bucket, Ma, to have a wash in?’

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Miss Witherspoon pursed her lips. 'Ma' seemed to her a great impertinence. 'There is a bathroom and basin upstairs,' she said.

'Yes, but some of the other chaps'll be using that. Got to be on parade in 'alf an hour, see?' They stood there in the doorway smiling and looking about them, hesitating and inquisitive, like two sheep at an open gate. She was surprised to see how different they looked now. Undressed, they were much less formidable. They had ceased to be simply soldiers: they had become individuals – two great boys. Miss Witherspoon ventured to look more attentively at the one who had spoken. He stood with his bare arms crossed in front of him. Round his middle, holding up his thick khaki trousers, he wore a broad scarlet belt decorated with a variety of brass badges and buttons. His hair was cropped close. Two mobile, dark brown eyes slid like bright beads in a round, swarthy face. He had a saucy turned-up nose. Yes, Miss Witherspoon saw at once that he was one of the saucy kind. She could see it in his smile too, a broad smile, half saucy, half shy.

'There's a pail there by the sink,' she said sternly; 'but I can't have you washing in here.'

'We can wash in the yard,' said the soldier, the broad smile still on his face. He dropped his crossed arms and went over, with elbows turned

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out and a swagger of the shoulders, to get the pail. Upstairs the bath-tap roared, now audible, now inaudible across the clumping and rumbling of heavy boots and the endless chatter of raucous voices. It sounded as if all the party-walls upstairs had been removed and the place had become one great crowded hall. Miss Witherspoon still stood in the kitchen. All her home life, she realized with terror, had suddenly been annihilated; for this would go on now, she supposed, till the end of the War. She was appalled, but not quite as appalled as she had been twenty minutes ago when those six clumsy giants, one indistinguishable from the other, had crowded into her front door. The sight of these two fellows in their shirt-sleeves had reassured her.

The pail clanked in the yard and then the back-door latch clattered and the other soldier came in carrying the pail. He smiled at her apologetically. 'Can I take some more water, Miss?' he said, and turned away to the sink, lifting up the empty pail.

It was his eyes that caught Miss Witherspoon's attention — dark blue eyes with black brows and heavy black lashes. She glanced at him again as he stood with his back to her with one hand on the running tap. The neckband of his shirt was tucked inwards, ready for his wash, showing the white, hairless skin of his neck below the sharp

line of the sunburn. His bare arm, raised to hold the tap, was white and hairless too, and when he lifted the full pail and turned round she saw a pink boyish face that blushed a little through the tan when she spoke to him.

‘Do you want me to lend you a towel?’ she said.

‘No, thank you, Miss; I’ve got one.’ He patted his left trouser-pocket and she saw that a hank of rather dirty towel hung out of it. ‘Why,’ she thought, looking at him more kindly, ‘he’s nothing but a great overgrown child.’

‘What’s your name?’ she asked him.

He stopped with the full pail hanging from his right arm, the left arm held away from his body to balance it. ‘Me? Jim Marsden, Miss.’

‘And the other soldier?’

‘My pal? He’s Stan. Stanley Rolf.’

How clear it all came back to her, after all these years: nine . . . nearly ten years. ‘Jimmy!’ she whispered to herself. ‘Jimmy Marsden!’ That was the door he had come in at. He had stood at the sink there. She fell back into her dream.

It was really, she reflected, from that moment when she asked him his name that she had set her heart on Jimmy – adopted him, as it were, for her own. Not that she had surrendered to this invasion of young men as soon as that. No: it had taken

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them a week – more, a fortnight – a fortnight, at least – to tame their ‘Ma.’ For it was they – she confessed it willingly now – who had tamed her, not she them. She smiled dreamily to herself. To begin with, she remembered, she had been very independent. Jimmy, of course, could have done what he liked from the first, but she had been very stand-offish with the rest. She complained about the way they banged the front door: and another thing, she told them – she couldn’t have them running in and out of her kitchen. ‘Right you are, Ma!’ they replied in a chorus. Their way of receiving her complaints was quite different from that of the young men at the street corner. They, she reflected, would have faced her with an amused and scornful silence and then laughed at her when her back was turned. These fellows were rough but, somehow, nicer, franker.

The one she held out against longest was Old Bill. What was his real name? She never could remember it now. Bill was older than the rest; a thick-set, ungainly fellow with a raggy, wet moustache and awful teeth. He wore a little bit of striped ribbon on his tunic: he had served in the Boer War. He had all sorts of dodges and ideas of his own: special ways, different from anyone else’s, of cleaning boots and buttons, folding trousers, packing kitbags. He was always boasting about

being an old soldier, and, when he did, the young ones used to break out into a ridiculous song:

‘Old soldiers never die, never die, never die;
Old soldiers never die,
Die, die, die!’

making the place sound no better than a public-house. Miss Witherspoon took a dislike to Bill at the outset. It was not only his appearance. He was low-class, rough-spoken: it was he, she was sure, who had first begun calling her ‘Ma.’ Curious, she reflected, how she used to dislike Bill. She remembered how he had come into the kitchen one day just as she was going into the yard to get some coal.

‘Coal?’ he had said, seeing her carrying the coal-bucket. ‘Want some coal, Ma? Give it to me!’ and he grasped the handle of the bucket.

But Miss Witherspoon held on to it. ‘No, thanks!’ she said coldly. ‘No, thanks! I can manage.’ And then, when Bill did not loose his hold: ‘Leave go, please!’

‘*Come on, Ma!*’ said Bill, and to prevent the struggle from becoming ridiculous she had been forced to let go. But she had been very much annoyed, and when Bill returned with the coal she wasn’t there to thank him.

Another time he had come upon her with pail,

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bath-brick, and scrubbing-brush, opening the front door.

'Fall out, Ma!' he shouted at her. 'I'll show you how to do a step.' He took off his tunic and began to take possession of the things, and again Miss Witherspoon had to retire indignantly to avoid inevitable defeat. Really the man was impossible. But the step, as it happened, had completed her surrender, for when she came out into the passage a few minutes later, Bill was just rising from his knees.

'What price this, Ma?' he called to her, and Miss Witherspoon had stepped acidly forward to inspect. The clean grey step was edged with a yellow border of bath-brick, and not only that but a semicircle of paving-stone in front of the step was also washed and bordered with yellow. Miss Witherspoon's face thawed a little. 'Well, I'm bound to say,' she remarked, 'it's beautifully done.'

'What I don't know about cleanin' steps . . .' declared Bill with great emphasis, and immediately the chorus broke out upstairs:

'Old soldiers never die, never die, never die.'

Soon Miss Witherspoon found that all the heavier jobs had been taken out of her hands: fetching coal, scrubbing floors, lighting the fire,

swilling out the yard – all of such jobs were done by the Tommies. She began to think she had turned into a lady with a whole staff of servants.

But soon she felt the desire to be doing jobs for them. It began with Jimmy, of course. One day he came and asked her for some grey wool. He wanted to darn a sock. ‘Bring the sock to me,’ she had said, ‘I’ll do it. And if you’ve a shirt or socks that want washing, bring them at the same time.’

‘Oh no, Miss!’ – Jimmy had always called her Miss to the last – ‘that would be . . .’

‘Run along now,’ she ordered him, ‘and don’t be silly’; and he had brought two pairs of socks and a grey flannel shirt. Private J. Marsden, No. 2071: she remembered even his number to this day.

Before long she was washing and darning for the whole lot of them, even for Old Bill. And Miss Witherspoon discovered that she had turned not into a lady with six servants, but into a woman with a family of great sons. ‘My boys,’ she used to call them when speaking of them to Mrs. Coleman and the rest at the Red Cross classes. Rules about banging doors and running in and out of the kitchen were forgotten. She scolded them still, but simply, now, out of excess of affection: ‘Now, whose cap is that on the dresser? Take it away at once.’ ‘Rolf, that shirt of yours isn’t aired. You

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can't have it yet.' She loved to have them swarming about the place with their strong bare arms and shining faces, to feel that the house was full of them – two clumping overhead, perhaps; one straddling in the yard, legs wide apart and body bent forward over a pail, scrubbing the back of his neck and ears with soap; Jimmy at the kitchen mirror carefully parting his black hair and smoothing it out with a wet brush. Jimmy always kept himself so smart. What, she wondered, did he think of those blue eyes of his, looking at him out of the mirror. Nothing remained now of the six huge soldiers, all exactly alike, who had crowded in on her only a few weeks ago, except only the lower halves of them – the tight cylindrical trousers, the clumsy puttees, the heavy boots, which made their legs look stiff and far too big for their bodies, 'like a lot of great foals,' she thought to herself.

And the language! Terrible expressions – *Hell*, *bloody*, and sometimes both together – became mere household words. Soon she forgot even to pretend to be shocked at them. 'Ain't it a bloody nuisance, Ma?' Bill had said when they were ordered out on Night Operations one wet night. 'It is, indeed!' she had replied, and they had all laughed. 'Lummy, Ma! You don't 'alf sling the language.' And she heard worse, when they didn't

know she was within hearing – words that had no meaning for her. ‘But after all,’ she said to herself, ‘they’re soldiers.’

Yes, they were a nice lot, that first lot. Jimmy, Old Bill, Stan Rolf, George Webster, Sam Barnes, and Bertie Smith. She remembered every name. Others that came later she had forgotten long since. But that first lot, of course, had stayed much the longest. Eight months. Yet during that time they were always, it seemed, on the point of going. All sorts of rumours came along. Now they were off in a week to Mesopotamia, now they were to be broken up and drafted to different units in France, once they were even said to be going to China. Each new rumour was the truth at last. ‘No mistake this time.’ ‘Gospel, I tell you! Bet you what you like! Straight from Corporal Johnson, Brigade Orderly Room.’

‘You and your rumours!’ said Miss Wither-
spoon. ‘Get along with you!’ But every time a new rumour came, her heart dropped like a stone.

Then her mind ran on to that terrible, rapturous time. It seemed to her now, as she looked back on it, that the slow passage of time had suddenly begun to hurry, to whirl visibly past, as it had done when as a little girl she had unhooked the pendulum from the kitchen clock at home. A storm of events had swept down on her, engulfing

her, whirling her from despair to delight and back again to despair, leaving her at last flung aside, deserted.

First had come the brief delightful days of Jimmy's illness. It was nothing much, as it turned out, but at first the doctor thought it might be appendicitis and he had to lie in bed, perfectly still, for two days. For those two days she had had him all to herself. On the first morning, as soon as the rest had gone on parade, she had gone to her linen drawer and got out two sheets and a pillow-case. He was in bed in the little room. At first he had resisted: he was quite comfortable, he said, in blankets. But the truth was she saw that he was shy. 'Such nonsense!' she said. 'And me nearly old enough to be your grandmother. Besides, you don't have to uncover yourself,' and she rolled the two sheets and slid them between his blankets in the way she had learnt at the Red Cross classes. Then she got him an extra pillow and brought him one or two books from the sitting-room.

'Now,' she said, gazing down at him, 'don't tell me that isn't more comfortable.'

'It's fine!' he replied, and his blue eyes smiled up at her. 'Think of the other poor devils on parade. "Shun. As you were. Slope arms. As you were. Form fours. As you were."' He's enough to

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drive you mad, our Major is.' He settled his shoulders into the pillows with a little sigh of content.

'Knock on the floor if you want anything,' she told him, and went off to the kitchen to see about some soup for his dinner. Extraordinary sounds came from the kitchen that morning: Miss Wither-
spoon was singing. And as she sang, her mind hovered timidly and ecstatically over a wonderful plan which, some weeks before, had begun to form itself in her mind. It was that she should adopt him as a son. She had a nice little sum put by which he could have some day, and meanwhile she made more than enough each year to keep them both in comfort. But, for the plan to be realized, he would have to be an orphan or at least to have parents who would be willing to part with him. Weeks ago she had made up her mind to question him. But the very fact that so much hung on his answer made it almost impossible for her to ask the question. She was afraid she might make herself ridiculous by her over-eagerness. For weeks she tried in vain to screw up her courage. Often, just when she had brought herself to the point of speaking, a sudden fear assailed her, telling her that the right moment had not yet come. But, now that he was ill, opportunities occurred all day long. If she still submitted to her cowardice she

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would never, she was convinced, be able to overcome it.

She asked him suddenly, almost in spite of herself, on the first afternoon of his illness, while she was sitting on the edge of his bed watching him have his tea, and, in a minute, her wonderful plan lay shattered before her eyes. Both his parents were alive. As soon as he got out of the army he was going into his father's business. He was an only son. She might have guessed it, all along, by the parcels he got.

She changed the subject so abruptly that he glanced at her in surprise. . . .

In two days he was up again, on light duty, and it was after his second morning on light duty that the blow fell. Stan Rolf yelled it out, coming off parade, as he went upstairs.

'Moving on to-morrow, Ma! No mistake this time. It's out in Orders.'

She stood for a moment, one hand against the passage-wall. Then she turned into the kitchen, to be alone. She felt suddenly very tired and sat down on the nearest chair beside the open door. A cold despair had clutched her, shrivelling her vitals. Then her mind flew to Jimmy. *He* couldn't go. He wasn't well enough. And in imagination she wrestled for Jimmy against the blind tyranny of the army. Ever since her life had become part

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of the soldier's life she had been darkly aware of that tyranny working behind the scenes, a vast black machine, the enemy of all love, desire, and humanity. Now, she felt, its relentless power was suddenly being increased: it was beginning to drive at high pressure, blind, irresistible. What difference would it make whether Jimmy was well or ill, whether she loved him or hated him? The machine would turn its iron wheel and the War, which had been waiting so long for Jimmy and the rest, would swallow him up. Suddenly she felt that she could not bear to be alone any longer. With a desperate determination she controlled her face and went upstairs.

Jimmy was bending over the bed in the little room with his back to her. He had turned all the things out of his kitbag and was absorbed in folding and repacking them.

'*You* won't be able to go!' she said, in a voice that sounded strange to her.

Jimmy looked up. 'Me? Why? I'm all right.'

'*You want* to go?' A chill crept to her heart. She couldn't face his eyes.

'Of course, when the other chaps are going.'

She stood with hanging arms, hands clasped in front of her, watching him. He was serenely absorbed in his preparations. Neither of them spoke. . . .

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And then, all in a flash it seemed, it was next morning and she stood holding open the front door as they went out, loaded up with their full-marching-order and their kitbags hoisted on their shoulders. 'Ta-ta, Ma! Good luck!' 'So long, Ma!' One by one they filed out, Jimmy among them. The Orderly Sergeant had told him, the night before, to parade with the rest. 'Good-bye! Good-bye!' She patted the pack on his back. 'You'll write, won't you?' 'You bet!' he promised. He was happy, smiling. His eyes, as they met hers, shone dark with contentment. For a moment they all stood together on the pavement, great strapping fellows; and she suddenly recalled the moment, eight months ago, when they had arrived, crowding in upon her, sweating, clumsy, all exactly alike. . . .

Miss Witherspoon sighed, and the sigh, catching and quivering in her breast, roused her again from her reverie. Her eyes wandered incredulously about the kitchen, empty now of all those ghosts of pain and happiness. How easy it was to call them back, alive and vivid, across the gulf of ten years. Or was it not rather she that crossed the gulf — dipped back into that past where they still somehow existed?

She closed her eyes. But in a moment she opened them again and began to move about the

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kitchen. It was not good, she knew, to dream too much of the past. What was it, this time, that had started her off? At first she could not remember. Then it came back to her that it had been the voices of the young men laughing behind the privet-hedge as she stood at the bedroom window. The church clock struck four and she began to fill the kettle and light the oil-stove. Why couldn't she go to the front door and call to them: 'Come in, all of you; come in, and let's have tea.' It seemed simple enough – simple, and yet, she knew, impossible, quite impossible. For the old barriers were up once again, as in the days before the War.

She took up her duster and went into the sitting-room: she might as well be doing a little dusting while the kettle boiled. But she had hardly begun to dust when there came a knock at the door.

She opened it to find a little group of young men standing before her. The foremost one held a boy by the arm – a boy who stood capless, with hanging head. 'He's ill or hurt,' she thought, and at the same moment the young man spoke:

'He's split his head, Miss. Fell off his bike at the corner there.' Another young man held the boy's cap and a third his bicycle.

Miss Witherspoon took the boy's arm. 'All

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right!' she said. 'All right! I'll take him.' The other fellow handed her the cap and the third leaned the bicycle against the house wall, near the door.

'It'll be all right here, won't it?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Miss Witherspoon, 'if you chaps will just keep an eye on it.' She closed the front door and led the boy into the kitchen. He walked with his head still bowed stiffly forward as though he thought that blood was dripping from the wound.

'Sit down here, Sonny!' she said. 'Now, where is it?'

The boy pointed gropingly.

Miss Witherspoon went to a drawer and got out scissors, lint, plaster, boracic powder and some clean linen. Then, separating the thick black hair with careful fingers she found the cut and examined it. 'Only the skin broken,' she remarked, and began to clip away the hair round the wound. 'Now your coat off!' She helped him out of his coat and took off his tie and collar. 'Now come over to the sink and let me bathe it.' She bathed the place with a clean rag and then went to the table and made a pad of lint, tore a bandage of linen, and, placing the pad on the wound, secured it with the bandage which she tied under his chin. The boy still held his head tilted awkwardly

forward. 'All right, Sonny!' she said, and put a finger under his chin and lifted his face. He raised his eyes to hers — dark eyes under black brows — and smiled at her. The kettle was boiling: she filled the teapot. Then she conducted him into the sitting-room and made him lie down on the sofa. 'Just for a short time,' she said. 'It's a good thing to rest a little after a knock on the head. Try and have a little nap. But first I'll bring you a cup of tea.'

She brought him the tea and laid his coat, collar, and tie on a chair. 'Now drink the tea and then lie quiet till I call you,' she ordered, closing the door on him. She returned to the kitchen, sternly repressing the desire to sit and talk to him. In an hour, she determined, she would look in and see how he was.

But before the hour was past she heard the sitting-room door open and he came into the kitchen. He had put on his coat and his collar and tie. 'I ought to be getting along,' he said. 'I've still ten miles to go and they'll be expecting me, and I feel quite all right now.'

'Sure?' she asked.

'Quite sure, thank you.' He touched the linen bandage and smiled shyly. 'May I take this off now?'

Miss Witherspoon considered seriously. 'Well,'

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she conceded: 'perhaps! But keep the pad on. You can put your cap over it.'

She untied the bandage for him, looking again into his eyes as she did so. 'What's your name?' she asked.

'George Heather.'

She turned from him with a little sigh. 'You're like a boy I knew once,' she said.

She followed him to the front door, opened it for him, and stood watching his face as he examined his bicycle. But the bicycle had escaped with the loss of a little paint and he turned to say good-bye.

'Call in, won't you?' she said, 'if you happen to pass this way again.'

He thanked her, and promised he would. 'But I don't suppose I shall come this way again,' he said. 'You see, I live in London.'

She watched him ride away, and then, feeling suddenly lonely, latched the front door and crossed the road to the corner house opposite her own, where she had a friend. And sitting in the friend's front room Miss Witherspoon told of the boy and the bicycle accident. 'It quite took me back,' she said, 'to the happy days of the War.'

Half an hour later, as she rose to return home, her friend pointed across the road. 'Do you see the new building?' she asked.

Miss Witherspoon glanced across. They were

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digging out the foundations of a new house in the gap between two houses opposite.

‘But that’s my view,’ she cried. ‘They’re shutting out my view of the sea.’

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AN ENGLISH LADY DRESSED IN BLACK WAS walking with her little boy down the Via Strozzi in Florence. The hot afternoon sun filled the streets, but the small Piazza Strozzi, brim-full of the shadow of the great gaunt palace on its western side, looked, as they passed it, like a dark, cool cistern.

'What's that place, Mother?' asked the little boy, pointing at the palace.

'That's a palace, darling — a very old palace.'

The little boy stared at the great wall with a puzzled look. 'But I thought . . . I didn't know . . . !'

'You didn't know what, darling?'

'I didn't know palaces were like that. It's got iron bars on the windows.'

But now they were turning the north-west corner of the palace into the gay, sunny street that leads to the river.

'You won't forget, will you, Julian,' said the lady, 'to behave well at your Grandmother's?'

The little boy looked up at her with a humorous smile. 'Don't I generally behave well?' he asked.

'Yes: but Grandmother may seem to be . . . well, rather a strange old lady. I mean, if . . . if

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you don't very much like her, you'll be polite all the same, won't you?'

'Why? Isn't she nice?'

'I don't know, dear. I'm like you, you see: I've never met her.'

'And didn't Father like her either?'

'Well, Father never saw her, you know, after he was a little boy a year older than you.'

'But wasn't she his mother?'

'Yes: but she was rather a funny mother and when he was seven years old she went away from home and never came back. She oughtn't to have done that, ought she?'

'And left Father all alone?'

'Oh no: there was Grandpapa and your Auntie Nan too.'

'Perhaps Father was glad, if she wasn't nice.'

'Oh, she may be quite nice really: I don't know. I only meant that if you didn't like her you mustn't mind. We shan't be there long, you see: just a short call.'

The street they were following had widened into an irregular piazza. Bright sunshine and keen shadows lay upon old grey houses and gay shop-windows. Here and there a narrow street, dark with shadow, opened between the houses. A tall column rose in the middle of the piazza: near it cabs stood waiting to be hired and pigeons

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bowed and strutted about its base or flew up into the sunlight with a soft clatter of wings. The lady and the little boy stopped near the dark entrance of a church and as the boy peered into the gloom he saw a baize door swing open. A woman, thickly veiled in black crape, came out: the door closed behind her with a muffled thud and a cold, sweet, sickly smell like burning sugar puffed out at him. He turned away and his eyes wandered back to the piazza and the column. A marble and bronze figure stood on the top of it, and just as he was looking at it, a pigeon with outstretched wings hung above it and, reaching down pink feet, settled on its head.

‘Mother,’ he asked, ‘who’s that a statue of?’

His mother was gazing at the dark side-streets across the piazza.

‘That? I don’t know, dear. Nobody in particular, I think.’ She took his hand and they crossed the piazza and began to enter one of the side-streets. Its pavements were so narrow that they had to walk in the roadway. Dark houses rose to a great height on each side: dark doorways opened into black, strangely-smelling shops: the air was cool and slightly sour like a yard that has just been sluiced and swept. The boy began to feel vaguely apprehensive.

‘Mother,’ he asked as he trotted by her side,

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‘aren’t we getting into rather . . . rather a strange place?’

It was what the lady herself had been thinking, and the quaver in his voice sent a faint echo of disquiet across her mind. She stopped and opened a little bag that hung from her wrist. ‘Just let me make sure once more,’ she said, taking out a letter. She glanced at it and, folding it again, placed it back in the bag. ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘we’re all right. Number ninety-seven.’ But she had made up her mind that if number ninety-seven looked uninviting they would not pay their call.

But a little farther on, the street became wider and less sinister, and the door of ninety-seven, which stood ajar, opened into a square court surrounded by arches and pillars. The court was moss-grown and neglected: an old cat lay sleeping near the drain in the centre of it. The little boy began to go towards it, but the lady held him back. ‘Don’t touch it, dear,’ she said. ‘It doesn’t look very clean.’ Two withered shrubs in great terracotta jars stood against two adjacent pillars, and passing between them under the colonnade they began to climb the broad stone staircase that led to the upper floors. A stale, underground smell of damp stone hung about the winding tunnel of the stair. At one of the turnings a little girl passed them: her small, dirty face had the alert

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eyes of a marmousette. Somewhere above them a shrill voice was shouting. 'Beppina!' it shouted. 'Beppina!' But the little girl continued to climb leisurely downstairs. On the landing they came upon a deep-bosomed, dishevelled woman standing at an open door. With one hand she held the door, with the other she clutched together her unbuttoned bodice. She stared at the lady and the boy with bold, suspicious eyes.

'La Contessa Pazzoli?' the lady asked timidly.

'Su!' the woman answered with a nod of her head towards the ascending stair, and as they turned the next corner the boy, looking timidly back, saw her sullen stare following them.

On the next landing they knocked at a large door. An elderly Italian woman admitted them. 'Pass, Signora! Pass!' she said, holding the door open for them to enter, and they stepped into a wide, dark hall full of the thick, furry smell of old upholstery. By degrees they realized through the dimness the crimson of heavy curtains, a great sofa and massive arm-chairs, and a table loaded with miscellaneous objects, conspicuous among them a tall, florid bronze — a confusion of plunging shapes. The place was airless, faded, unhappy — grandeur gone threadbare. It seemed as if the sun could not have shone there for a hundred years. Ponderous frames hung from the walls: on either

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side of a vast stone chimneypiece rose a doorway of carved stone. Both the doors were closed.

The woman led them to the sofa and invited them to be seated. 'I will tell the Contessa,' she said, and crossed the hall.

The little boy stroked the arm of the sofa. 'Is it satin, Mother?' he whispered.

The lady nodded. The woman opened the farther of the two doors, letting out into the hall a murmur of voices. The voices ceased as she went in, pulling-to but not shutting the door behind her, and soon they heard her announcing the visitors. A harsh old woman's voice interrupted her. '*Chi è?*' it asked irritably. '*Come?* What is the woman saying? *Inglese?* I can't hear a word. Sir George, please go and find out who it is.'

Then the noise of conversation began again, and a moment later the door opened and a gentleman came out and crossed the hall towards them. He was an old gentleman, tall, spare, and distinguished looking. He wore a black morning-coat and an elaborate black-satin tie in which a diamond sparkled. His long, parched face was set off by a fine nose. But as soon as he spoke his face lost its dignity and became loose and foolish. He bowed as the lady rose from the sofa.

'The Contessa has asked me to . . . er! These Italian servants . . . er . . . sometimes . . . er!'

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'I am Mrs. Fillimore, Mrs. Julian Fillimore,' said the lady, and when this did not appear to have enlightened the old gentleman she added: 'My husband, you see, was the Contessa's son.'

'Oh . . . ah . . . to be sure!' the old gentleman whispered. 'Her earlier marriage, of course.' He made a foreign gesture as though condoning an indiscretion. 'Of course, we all know that, with the dear Contessa, family details are a little . . . er . . . a little involved.' He threw up his head and uttered a little shower of cackles. 'But allow me to . . . er!' and he began to lead the way to the door. 'And this, I suppose, is a grandson?' He paused to lay a hand on Julian's shoulder. 'Well, well! Well, well!'

The little boy flinched at the old gentleman's touch. At first sight he had rather liked him. He had been quietly staring at him all the time he was talking to his mother. But when he had given that strange cackle Julian knew instantly that he disliked the old gentleman and was afraid of him. He could not have explained why. All he could have said would have been that there was a little piece of gold in the old gentleman's teeth when he laughed and that his eyes seemed to be green. Green and the horrid little laugh! He remembered a parrot which had bitten his finger. His nurse had told him that it was a very wicked bird - 'a

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foul-mouthed creature,' she had said; and the expression, which was new to Julian, had hinted, for him, at something vaguely sinister. If his grandmother was like the old gentleman he knew that he would not like her at all.

Though the room they now entered was a large one, its atmosphere was close. The new-comers were repelled by it on the very threshold, for it was thick and stale and full of a nauseous sweet perfume which only half disguised its staleness. At the first glance the room, by reason of its great height and the two tall windows immediately opposite to the door, was impressive; but the next suggestion was one of bareness and neglect, for its walls were blotched and discoloured by dampness and it seemed to be empty. But, as they soon discovered, it was not empty. It was rather as if its last remains of grandeur had been driven by age and poverty to the end of the room farthest from the door. There a vast edifice of yellow brocade, broad and cavernous at its base, tapered up to an elaborate golden coronet slung from the ceiling by silken ropes and tassels. On either side of it hung an enormous picture, each a crowded scene of richly-dressed figures. As the old gentleman led them across the bare floor they saw that the yellow curtains were the canopy of a great bed.

'You knew,' he whispered, 'that the Contessa

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had been obliged for the last week to keep her bed?' He paused and bent his head to the lady's ear. 'Between ourselves, she's in a bad way: much worse than she will admit.'

'Come along, Sir George! Come along!' called a harsh voice from the bed, the same voice they had heard before. 'Bring them along. Don't stand mumbling there. Who are they?'

The old gentleman tiptoed to the bed, leaving the lady and the little boy standing alone. In the bed, propped against pillows and covered with a green brocaded bedspread, sat a curious figure. It wore a fashionable hat with a sweeping ostrich-plume and a loose velvet jacket edged with fur. The face was sharp-featured and aristocratic – an older and more faded version, Mrs. Fillimore thought to herself, of Sir Joshua's Mrs. Siddons. The remains of beauty were vitiated by the hardness of her expression and voice. Now she was engaged in a subdued dialogue with Sir George. The little boy stared at her apprehensively. He felt uncomfortable and half ashamed at seeing an old lady in bed. But it was not only that. She had, after all, proved to be, in his innocent eyes, like, far too like, the old gentleman. They had time – he and his mother – as they stood there rather uncomfortably waiting, to notice also the other people in the room. Two of them, seated in

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threadbare brocaded chairs, were ladies. The third – a smartly-dressed young man with a glossy black head – stood holding his hat, cane, and pale-grey gloves near a vast black stove whose pipe rose like a charred pine-trunk and broke through the faded wall-paper high up under the ceiling. But suddenly they heard the old lady's voice from the bed:

'Come along, Mrs. Fillimore. Come here and let us have a look at you.'

The lady went towards the bed, followed by her little boy.

'Now, tell me your name. A mother-in-law can't call her daughter-in-law Misses.'

'My name is Letitia.'

'Letitia! Not a bad name. No, I don't mind Letitia. And how long, Letitia, is it since you married Julian?'

'We were married nearly nine years ago.'

'And Julian left you well-off?'

'My husband naturally left me all he had,' Mrs. Fillimore replied with reserve.

'Naturally, you say? You don't think, then, that he might have remembered his mother?'

Mrs. Fillimore flushed and fixed her glance more intently on the Contessa. The old woman was inspecting her with sharp, aggressive eyes. Was the question serious or intended to be

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humorous? In either case she had evidently meant to provoke a reply, so Mrs. Phillimore gave her a reply.

'That,' she said, 'would surely have needed rather a long memory?' Sir George threw up his head and uttered his dry cackle, but the Contessa pursed her lips and abandoned the subject, turning to the rest of the company.

'Emily,' she said to the elder of the two ladies, 'this is my daughter-in-law Letitia. That, Letitia, is the Marchesa Salimbene who used to play the piano . . . but wonderfully, superbly . . . and has now given it up for poetry-writing or something.'

The Marchesa shook hands with Mrs. Phillimore and then half turned towards the bed. 'I fear, Susan,' she replied with an American accent, 'that you don't understand poetry. To me my poetry is more than my playing ever was.'

The Contessa laughed derisively. 'My dear Emily, you're a perfect goose. You and your poetry!'

The second lady, pale, thin-lipped, virginal, who, it seemed, could never have been young, had risen from her chair expecting to be introduced, but the Contessa ignored her and proceeded to introduce the young man. 'Count Vivaldi, the son of a dear friend of mine who won't come to see

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me because she's afraid I may borrow money from her.'

The young Italian, faultlessly dressed, his black head smooth and bright as marble, bowed in silence and without the smallest change in his handsome, swarthy face.

'Isn't that it, Ascanio?' the Contessa persisted more loudly.

'I gave you her message, Contessa,' the young man replied, 'that she hoped to be able to call later.'

'But, in the end, will unhappily be prevented! Confess, Ascanio!'

'Unfortunately I am not a clairvoyant, Contessa.'

The Contessa laughed. 'Of course not. Just a nice, simple, but rather artful young man. Eh?' She waved a hand towards the second lady. This other person, Letitia, is Miss Mildred Carver. Miss Carver is supposed to be some relation of mine, aren't you, Mildred? But I can never discover exactly where she comes in. Where *do* you come in, Mildred?

Miss Carver parted her straight, expressionless lips. 'Well, my grandfather — mother's father — married your Aunt Sarah as his second wife. Or rather, it was not my grandfather, I believe, but my grandfather's brother, his younger . . .'

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'Well, let us leave it at that, Mildred. We can't all be expected to be thrilled by your family affairs, my dear. But where does that child come from?' the Contessa asked, catching sight for the first time of the little boy. 'But, of course, I remember. It's little . . . little what's-his-name?'

The boy, embarrassed and afraid of the fierce old lady, shrank against his mother.

'His name is Julian,' said Mrs. Fillimore.

'Julian, to be sure. Called after his father. The name, of course, comes from *my* family. Come here, Julian.' The Contessa's voice had grown a little less harsh.

Mrs. Fillimore led the boy to the bed.

'Well, my dear,' said the old lady, 'and what do you think of your Granny? You've come a year or so too late, I'm afraid. We people aren't what we used to be: are we, Sir George?'

Sir George held up his hands. 'My dear Contessa, you don't look a day older than you did ten years ago.' He turned away to the Marchesa. 'She looked a hundred even then,' he cackled.

'Sh . . . sh! Please be careful, Sir George,' whispered Miss Carver, scowling at the old man.

Sir George sniffed scornfully. 'She's as deaf as a post,' he said.

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The Marchesa glanced up at him with quiet contempt. 'Yes,' she said; 'but so are you, you see, and so you never know how loud you speak.'

But the Contessa had heard nothing. She was shaking a roguish finger at Sir George, and little Julian, staring at her in fascinated repulsion, saw the sudden rainbow flash of a jewel on her bony hand. As for Sir George, he had not noticed her playfulness. Snubbed by the Marchesa, he had gone over to Miss Carver and was engaging her and the young Count in a discussion on Italian art. The Marchesa turned to talk to Mrs. Fillimore and, finding himself deserted, the little boy continued to stare at his grandmother. As he watched her he saw her face change and she looked, suddenly, as if she were all alone. She had forgotten her visitors, it seemed, and was thinking. Then with a sudden movement she turned her head and glanced into a little mirror which hung inside the bed-curtain on a level with her face. Julian saw her raise a hand to her hat and smooth the plume. Then with a fluttering hand she patted her cheeks. Unexpectedly she turned from the mirror and, finding Julian's eyes fixed upon her, made a little face at him. The boy blushed crimson and turned away his head. When he ventured to look again he saw that his grand-

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mother was again peeping into the little mirror. The great yellow curtain half screened her from the rest of her visitors. She held something in her hand – a little box, it seemed – and she was dipping one finger into it and then rubbing first one cheek and then the other. Once she darted a quick, crafty glance at the company, but seeing that she was unobserved she continued busily and tremulously to fumble at the little box and dab with one jewelled finger at her face. But Sir George had an eye open for everything. He had seen, and with a gesture of scornful toleration he turned his back to the bed and executed a dumb-show imitation of the Contessa's activities, followed by his inevitable cackle.

‘Have you ever seen one of our Punch and Judy shows, Count?’ he asked the young Italian.

The young man raised his eyebrows at the apparent inconsequence of the question. ‘I have read of them,’ he said. ‘They are derived, I believe, from the old Pulcinella plays in Naples. But I have never seen one.’

‘Perhaps,’ Sir George cackled mischievously, ‘you will see one, or something like one, before very long.’

‘Before long? I think not. I fear I shall not be in England again for some time.’

Julian could tell that there was some hidden

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meaning in what Sir George had said and a still greater fear and dislike of him grew up in his heart. He glanced again at his grandmother. She had emerged now from the curtain and sat propped against her pillows as before, her hands clasped on the green brocade cover in front of her. With a sudden thrill of horror he saw that her cheeks were streaked and blotched with red. At the same moment Sir George turned. 'Only fancy, Contessa,' he shouted, and the other guests, turning to the Contessa as he spoke, gave a little shocked gasp: 'only fancy, our young friend here has never seen a Punch and Judy show!'

But the Contessa did not hear him. She sat with her head bent slightly forward and her eyes half closed. With her reddened cheeks and plumed hat she looked like a large doll. Julian was afraid and crept over to his mother, who sat near the Marchesa. Sir George, with occasional glances towards the bed, was chattering once again to Miss Carver and the young Count. The Contessa sighed, opened her eyes, and after a moment raised her head. It was as if she had awoken from a trance.

'No, certainly,' she said gaily, 'not what we used to be: are we, Sir George?'

At the sound of her voice Sir George turned. 'Well, you can't expect us all, dear Contessa, to

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... er ... to preserve our looks as you do. Upon my word, you're wonderful. Isn't she, Marchesa?

The Contessa simpered. 'Oh, don't start Emily off!' she cried. 'When it's a question of my looks she's sure to say something horrid.'

'My dear Susan, when have I said horrid things about your looks? Never, I'm sure! If you would be content to look like an old lady . . .'

'There! What did I say? Hateful thing!'

Sir George let off a volley of delighted cackles. 'Beauty unadorned!' he carolled. 'Certainly a rare possession: only too rare, alas! We are not all, are we, Contessa, as fortunate as the Marchesa?'

'You should have learnt by this time, Sir George,' said the Marchesa coldly, 'that both polite and impolite dishonesty is wasted on *me*.'

Sir George turned away with a gesture of mock distress. 'The Marchesa is always so unkind to me, Miss Carver.'

Miss Carver's lips and eyebrows grew for a brief moment thinner. It was uncertain whether she had smiled or frowned.

The Contessa chuckled. 'Dishonesty, my dear Emily! But three-quarters of our social intercourse is dishonesty. What should we do without it? If you succeeded in making poor Sir George honest

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you would merely have succeeded in making him more detestable than he is already.'

'*Brava! Brava*, Contessa! How . . . er . . . how delightful to hear you in your old form again!'

The Contessa sighed. 'I wish I were; but I'm not. I'm not really feeling well to-day.'

Miss Carver glanced sharply at the old lady. 'Is it not time you rested a little, Contessa?' she asked.

'No, Mildred, since you ask me, it is *not*.'

But Miss Carver persisted. 'You must remember,' she observed, 'that Dr. Morozzi said you were to see no one to-day.'

'Morozzi is a fool and I told him as much yesterday,' replied the Contessa. 'If I were to give in to him and you I should be dead of boredom in a week.'

Miss Carver shrugged her narrow shoulders.

'But where is Isabella?' the Contessa asked suddenly.

The visitors gazed at one another. The Contessa was always surprising them.

'Isabella? Whom do you mean, Susan?' the Marchesa asked.

'Isabella, my daughter-in-law.'

Mrs. Fillimore returned to the bed. 'You mean me, don't you, Contessa? You mean Letitia!'

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'Yes, you, my dear. That's right. Why do you keep running away? Come and sit here: I want to talk to you.'

Sir George tiptoed up to them, smiling and washing his clasped hands. He behaved, Mrs. Fillimore was beginning more and more to feel, like a polite detective. But the Contessa drove him away. 'Go away, Sir George. Go away. Go and try if you can make Miss Carver laugh: no one has succeeded so far. I want to talk to Isabella.'

'To Letitia!' Miss Fillimore corrected gently.

'Yes, to Letitia!' The Contessa patted her hand: her voice had suddenly become gentle. For a while she said nothing: she was waiting for the guests to resume their conversations. 'You mustn't mind Sir George,' she whispered, as though asking an indulgence. Then, looking at her daughter-in-law, she began: 'Tell me, my dear, about my little Federigo.'

'Federigo, Contessa?'

'Your husband, my dear.'

'Julian.'

'Yes, Julian. Did he speak to you of his mother, ever?'

'Sometimes, Contessa. But, you see, he was so small, wasn't he, when . . .'

'Go on, my dear. When I ran away.'

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'When you ran away, that he hardly remembered.'

'Of course, poor little lad! Only seven. A pretty boy he was then: prettier than his sister. You must try not to think too hardly of me, my dear. I can't tell you about it all here; and, besides, I'm too tired. The past's the past: there's no good digging it up at this time of day.'

'He told me once, I remember,' said Mrs. Fillimore, 'that you were very beautiful.'

'Did he? Did he really? Think of that!' The Contessa's voice grew reflective, remote. 'Think of it!' she repeated. 'That he should have remembered that!' Her voice died away in a whisper and she sat holding her daughter-in-law's hand, her eyes half closed. The plume in her hat nodded suddenly forward, and Mrs. Fillimore, looking into her face, saw that she had fallen into a dose. The old woman's little gust of tenderness had disarmed her dislike and, as she gazed at the unconscious figure with its festive hat and daubed cheeks, faintly oscillating like a realistic waxwork to its short, quick breathing, a great pity invaded her and she stroked with her fingers the small hand that she held in hers. She was disturbed by a whisper beside her. Sir George had tiptoed up again. 'Is she . . . er . . . ? Is she . . . er . . . ?' he whispered.

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'She's asleep. Please don't disturb her,' Mrs. Fillimore whispered back.

He stood gazing at the fantastic swaying figure. 'Poor Susan!' he murmured. 'A strange spectacle!'

But the Marchesa, catching Mrs. Fillimore's eye, called him away. 'Come here, Sir George. If you must talk, you can talk to me.'

It seemed to Mrs. Fillimore that an immense time passed as she sat holding the old lady's hand and listening passively to the ebb and flow of conversation behind her. The young Italian's precise English, the colourless voice of Miss Carver, the restrained cackle of Sir George and the slightly plaintive accent of the Marchesa mingled in a rising and falling drone. The little boy Julian was sitting by himself in a huge chair near the foot of the bed. Half turning her head, she could see him from where she sat. His eyes met hers: he was mutely asking her to take him away. She nodded encouragement to him, nodded again, and whispered, 'Soon!' His eyebrows went up: then he nodded back to her and smiled. When her eyes returned to the bed the Contessa was awake and gazing at her with a vague question in her glance. Her lips moved: she began to murmur something. Mrs. Fillimore leaned forward to hear. 'Dino!' the old lady was saying.

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'The child. Where is he?' Mrs. Fillimore beckoned to Julian, and the little boy came and stood by the bed. The Contessa nodded her head and suddenly began speaking to him in Italian. The boy drew back. This strange, incomprehensible chatter from his strange grandmother alarmed him.

'He doesn't understand Italian, Contessa,' Mrs. Fillimore told her.

'Not understand? But isn't it Dino?'

'No. Julian.'

'Not Federigo's son?'

'No, Contessa. Julian's son. I am Julian's wife, you know.'

'Yes, yes, Julian! You know I meant Julian,' said the old woman irritably. 'Come here, my dear.' Julian took a step forward. 'Give me your hand.' She was fumbling with her own hands as though trying to take off imaginary gloves. 'Bother!' she muttered to herself. 'Bother!' The clumsiness and weakness of her hands were making her angry. Then Mrs. Fillimore saw that she was fumbling at a ring, a single great diamond; and next moment she had succeeded in getting it off. But it fell on to the green bedspread and she was baffled again. Mrs. Fillimore found it for her and placed it in her hand. The old woman took it between finger and thumb.

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'Hold out your hand, dear,' she said to Julian. Her own hand shook and it was some time before she succeeded in slipping the ring on to one of the boy's fingers. 'That belonged to your great-grandmother,' she told him. She folded his fingers against his palm and clasped his hand in hers. 'There! Hold your little hand tight, like that, and don't open it till you get home.'

But again Sir George was beside them. 'Be careful, Contessa!' he said. 'Don't do anything . . . er . . . ill-advised.'

The old woman looked up at him and her face hardened. A parrot-like mischief appeared in her eyes. 'Ah, there you are! So you saw, did you? Poor Sir George! The assets keep diminishing, don't they? But you must be accustomed to disappointments by now: whereas Mildred there is an incurable optimist. She still firmly believes that I am a rich relation. Still *expecting*, aren't you, Mildred? Though not, we'll hope, in the sense in which the word is sometimes used.'

The Contessa burst into a peal of laughter, so loud, so gay that all the visitors turned at once towards the bed. But the laughter broke off in mid-flight – broke off into sobs and sharp, spasmodic gasps. She clutched at her breast with groping hands. A sound like a smothered shriek burst from her lips. Miss Carver leapt from her

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chair and hurried to the bed. 'Leave it to me,' she whispered to Mrs. Fillimore. 'I understand.'

Mrs. Fillimore rose and led Julian away to where the Marchesa and the young Count stood waiting in consternation. From there the scene about the bed was hidden by the yellow curtain: but from behind it they could hear a shuffling of bedclothes and the sound of agitated movements, and once the curtain bulged suddenly out as if someone had fallen against it. Then all was quiet, and soon Miss Carver, her face ashen, appeared round the curtain holding in one hand the Contessa's gay hat. For a moment she stared as if stupefied: then, meeting the scared and questioning glances of the visitors, she parted her lips as if to speak. But at that moment her eyes fell on Julian and she checked herself.

The Marchesa turned to Mrs. Fillimore. 'Hadn't you better take the boy away?' she whispered.

The remark roused Mrs. Fillimore, and taking Julian by the hand she led him towards the door. He trotted beside her, still holding his hand tightly closed as his grandmother had folded it. He was glad to be going at last out of that strange company. What had happened to his grandmother when she had laughed in that curious way? She must have choked, he thought; and now they

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were making her sit still till she had recovered. She had been so strange, so alarming all the time, that her final behaviour had seemed to him hardly more startling than the rest. As he went out into the hall he glanced back inquisitively at the bed to see what she was doing. In the dim yellow cave of the canopy all was strangely quiet. Except for the shape under the green brocade cover it seemed as if his grandmother had vanished. It reminded him of something he had once seen at Maskelyne and Devant's. As they crossed the hall they heard Sir George's voice calling from the bedroom. 'Angelina! Angelina!' he called, and the woman who had admitted them hurried past them towards the bedroom door.

The young Count left immediately after Mrs. Fillimore, and a few minutes later Sir George and the Marchesa went out, leaving Miss Carver and the woman in charge. They crossed the hall in silence. As Sir George pulled to the heavy front-door behind them the noise of its closing echoed solemnly down the damp stair. The Marchesa gave a little shiver. Sir George, peering short-sightedly at the steps, shook his head. 'Poor Susan!' he said. 'Poor Susan! Always so erratic. Just like her to upset us all like this!' And as they rounded the turn of the stair he added sadly: 'She owes me several hundred pounds which I can ill

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afford. Have you . . . er . . . have you suffered at all, Marchesa?’

‘I am not a moneylender,’ the Marchesa answered coldly, ‘but I have sometimes given presents.’

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IT WAS UNBELIEVABLE TO DAVID AND JANET THAT Nanny should be leaving. They would have been less surprised to hear that Father was leaving. Father, after all, went away every morning and did not get back till nearly bedtime: he was a movable and unstable item. But Nanny, like Mother, was of the order of eternal things: she had been there always from the beginning. She must, David thought, be an extremely old woman. Yet now she was leaving them to be married: surely an extraordinary thing for her to do! Mother seemed to think so, too. 'Some people,' David had overheard her say to Father, 'seem never to know when they are well off.'

She was going to marry Robert. David knew Robert quite well. He had frequently met him in the kitchen. He had a woolly beard that seemed to be fastened on round his ears, like Santa Claus's; above it his two cheeks stuck out like apples, and he had nice blue eyes which seemed always to be twinkling. David had liked him from the first, and now it was a shock to him to hear that he was going to marry Nanny. He had never suspected that Robert and Nanny loved one another better than they loved him: he felt as if they had been practising a deception upon him all

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this time. 'Why, I declare! My boy's quite jealous,' said Nanny, and when they both laughed David blushed scarlet.

When Nanny went there would be only Martha the housemaid left. Old Cookie had gone away some time ago, and there was a new cook whom David hated, because one day, when he had gone into the kitchen as usual, she had pointed to his footmarks on her newly-scrubbed floor and remarked tartly that little boys should learn to put their feet in their pockets!

When the moment came for Nanny to leave, there was a hullabaloo. Nanny stood in the middle of the nursery with her hat and coat on, looking pale and embarrassed. A strange tin box with cord round it, which David had never seen before, stood near the door with her other coat and umbrella laid neatly on the top of it. Mother was there, too, and suddenly her face began to twitch. It was difficult at first to tell whether she was laughing or crying till, to David's horror, two tears ran down her cheeks. He had never seen Mother cry: in fact, he had always believed that only children cried; and she was doing it quite quietly too, without any of the noise that he and Janet always made. Janet, seeing Mother cry, broke out suddenly into a loud howl. It was awful. Then Nanny stooped down and kissed him

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good-bye: as she did so, a tear ran out of her left eye and down the edge of her nose. At that, David too started whimpering, and by the time he had pulled himself together again Mother was standing by the nursery window, looking out. 'Hurry up, David!' she was saying. 'Come and wave to Nanny.' David went to the window. The cab was already moving away and in its window he saw Nanny waving a white pocket-handkerchief. When the cab had vanished round the corner and they suddenly found themselves alone in the nursery, it seemed as if the whole world was plunged into a profound silence.



Nanny's new home was only two miles away. It was in one of a series of new red-brick and slate-roofed streets which sprawled up the side of what had been a beautiful wooded valley, until, a few years ago, the town had stretched a new arm and, at the end of the arm, had opened out a broad new hand which had laid hold of a whole wooded hillside. An estate at the opposite side of the valley had been presented by its owner to the town and was now laid out as a public park.

Most of their walks took them into the Park. They went there with Mother or Nanny and, after Nanny had left them, with Nurse. Nurse was the name of the new nurse. She was nice, but she was

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different from Nanny, and she had a curious smell of camphor and stewed prunes.

Soon after Nanny's departure, they were told that they were going to be taken to see her. Martha took them because Martha knew the way. They walked right through the Park and out by an iron gate at the far end into a strange new world. David was wearing a new straw hat so that he felt and behaved differently from usual. A cinder-path, with a high wall on one side and a low one on the other, led up a steep hill. David climbed on to the low wall and walked along the top of it. When Martha told him to come down he took no notice. 'Very well!' said Martha. 'If you tumble down and break your leg, don't ask me to help you, 'cos I won't: that's all! Look what a good girl *Janet* is!' David looked down at Janet. She was holding Martha's hand and she had her goody-goody face on, a face which always infuriated him. 'It's only because she's frightened to climb the wall!' he sneered.

Nanny's house was called Number Twenty-Nine. Martha told David it was a flat; why, he could not understand because when the front-door was opened you saw a steep flight of stairs covered with new oilcloth. 'Well, I never!' said Nanny, beaming in the doorway. 'And David's got a new hat, too!' She shepherded them inside and shut

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the door. 'And how's my precious?' she asked, lifting up Janet and carrying her up the steep oilcloth stairs. The rooms smelt of polish and new carpet. In the kitchen a bright fire danced and crackled in the grate, and the shovel and poker and tongs and the handle of the oven-door shone like silver. There were three pots of geraniums in the window, with leaves like little green dusty plates tilted outwards towards the light. In the sitting-room, which was never used and had a cold, inhospitable smell of its own, a mat with long white fur lay before the empty fireplace in which there was a pink paper fan. There was a mirror like a frozen pool over the mantelpiece with water-lilies on it, and on each side of it hung a beautiful painted plate in a red velvet frame. All the ornaments stood on woolly green mats. But the best thing in the room was the harmonium. You worked with your feet and, when you played it, it sounded like church. David was fascinated, and when Nanny lifted him on to the stool and let him play he was so entranced that he forgot all about everything else and took no notice when they left him there alone. Sometimes he forgot to work his feet: then the music gave a dismal howl and stopped. Afterwards, all through tea, David remained dazed and his feet felt as if they were still paddling up and down.

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One day Martha told them that Nanny had a baby. David thought it rather funny of her to go in for a baby when she already had himself and Janet; but then it had also been rather strange of her to marry Robert when she was so happy with them at home. The baby was called Joseph. It lay in its cot with large, clear eyes like little pools, and it had two funny little round holes for a nose. David and Janet were rather embarrassed by it, and it was a nuisance, too, the way it occupied so much of Nanny's attention when they went to see her.

But Janet soon discovered that a baby was almost as good as a doll, and by watching carefully what Nanny did to Joseph it was possible, she found, to get all sorts of ideas about the way to treat Ida and Blackie, the two dolls which Mother had given her last birthday. As for David, he took refuge more and more in the harmonium. Always now, soon after their arrival at Number Twenty-Nine, as they sat talking in the bright kitchen, he would become aware of a hunger somewhere in the pit of his stomach which would soon define itself as a burning desire for the cold, inhuman atmosphere which in his mind signified the sitting-room: and then this impression again would clear and focus itself suddenly on the harmonium. He was being irresistibly drawn

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towards the harmonium. Then, when he thought no one was looking, he would sneak out of the room, close the door softly with a delicious feeling of escape and, blind and deaf to everything else, make straight for the harmonium. Feverishly and impatiently he folded back the lid; then, pulling out the stops and paddling with his feet, he floated away, released at last, into the ecstatic world of his desire. Nothing but the news that tea was ready could prevail to call David back. 'That boy's going to be a church organist, *I'll* be bound!' said Nanny.

*

In course of time, as Joseph began to scramble about and become more of a little boy and less of a baby, David got accustomed to him, though he never really liked him; but that was because he was so much younger than himself. After all, both David and Janet could now read and write, and David was getting on so well on the piano that he could play real hymns off by heart on Nanny's harmonium.

One morning, when Martha took them over to Number Twenty-Nine, they found that Joseph had been put into knickerbockers. They made him look smaller instead of bigger, but he was very proud of them and spent all his time climbing up and down stairs, although the knickerbockers

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were so tight that he had to lift his legs sideways instead of straight up like other people. With his big curly head and his tiny body he looked like the British Lion. Nanny took them into the kitchen and offered them ginger wine. She set wineglasses on the table and then went into the larder to get the bottle. Joseph took up one of the empty glasses and pretended to drink out of it. After that, he blew into it, making strange spluttering noises as though he was blowing a trumpet. Then he smiled slyly at David and Janet. But David and Janet did not smile back: they looked away disapprovingly, and Joseph put the glass back beside the others. David drew one of the glasses nearer to him; he wanted to make sure that he didn't get the one that Joseph had spluttered into. Nanny came back with a plate of biscuits and the bottle of ginger wine. She filled the glasses. The glass that Joseph had spluttered into went to Janet. Joseph ate biscuits and then drank with a crumby mouth, so that crumbs came off into his glass. Then he tried to rake them out with one finger. 'Fishes!' he muttered pensively. 'Joseph! Joseph! Give over!' said Nanny.

*

That was the last time they saw Nanny. Soon after that, David and Janet went for a long visit to Granny. Granny lived in a beautiful house near

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the sea. In the fine weather they used to play all day on the sands. One glorious day Father came to help, and they made a castle so huge that Father and David and Janet could all stand upon it at once. They stayed upon it till the waves actually dashed against it and ate away the walls, and it seemed so dangerous that David and Janet yelled with delighted fear. And when at last they simply had to abandon it, they seemed to be right out in the middle of the sea, and on their headlong flight to the shore David's knickerbockers were soaked through and Janet fell down four times and was drenched to the skin.

On wet days they played in the big nursery, where there was a full-sized rocking-horse that Father used to ride when he was a little boy, and a drawer full of toys. There was a funny-looking doll among the toys, with a sweet, rather horrible smell, which they called The Trooper, because they had once heard Father say that somebody or something smelt like a trooper, by which he seemed to mean very much indeed. David's favourite game in the nursery was to play at going a journey. A particular feeling of delight used to come over him when he played it, much the same as when he played the harmonium. The game consisted in taking all the toys out of the toy-drawer and packing them on to the rocking-horse, and

then David and Janet sat astride on the rockers at each end of the horse and the long, monotonous journey began. Miles upon miles they travelled, and all the time they sang a curious song of their own invention which went in time to the rocking, and when they spoke it was in a strange tongue which they alone could understand. Janet was always the first to tire, but David generally succeeded in forcing her to remount and undertake a few more stages of the journey. Then, quite suddenly, he would tire of it himself. The excitement, the ecstasy inside him, would suddenly go out as if someone had turned out the gas. Weariness and disillusion descended upon him and he found himself faced by the unendurable confusion of toys heaped upon the rocking-horse. Then he and Janet would sneak out of the nursery, abandoning everything. But infallibly, not long afterwards, the terrible voice of Nurse would be heard in the house. 'Master David! Master David!' she shouted, with an upward lift on the last syllable: 'Come up at once, both of you, and put away the toys!' Then in the blackness of disgust they would slink back into the nursery and the desolating process of putting-away would begin. Angrily and despairingly they heaped the toys pell-mell into the drawer, careless of order and method: and then, invariably, the drawer refused to shut. David

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struggled till he was red in the face, then he kicked the drawer viciously and attempted a half-hearted rearrangement of the obstructing toys. At the second try the drawer would stick again, but David, with a desperate shove, would overcome the obstruction and leave the nursery with a sigh of relief, secretly aware that some toy – The Trooper or the tin rainbow-striped humming-top – had been broken or bent in the process.

In the evening, before they went to bed, they went for an hour to the drawing-room where Granny, who was small and fat and comfortable like a cottage-loaf, and wore a little white lace cap on her head, would read them entrancing stories in a soft, quiet voice that seemed always to be telling exciting secrets. And then they would be roused by the opening of the door and the presence of Nurse would be discovered standing in the doorway, like a bad fairy. The hateful hour for bed had arrived. 'Not yet! Not yet!' wailed David and Janet in chorus. 'One moment, Nurse! *One* moment!' Granny would say in her gentle voice: 'we're just finishing.'

*

When at last they returned home, years and years seemed to have passed, so that when, one day at lunch soon after their return, Mother told them that while they were away Nanny had died,

they hardly realized what it meant. And not many months after that, when Martha came back from one of her Sundays-out she brought them the news that Robert had married again. 'Married again?' said Mother indignantly. 'And I've been sympathizing with him *all* this time!' 'Well'm,' said Martha, 'I think he can be excused. You see, there was no one to look after Joseph.' But that didn't seem to console Mother. She gave a little angry snort. 'And to *think*,' she repeated, 'that I've been sympathizing with him *all* this time!'

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THE TEA-TIME RUSH WAS OVER. ONLY A FEW people remained in the teashop. A fat, red-faced man with a watch-chain and a bowler-hat that looked slightly too small for him, sat at a table in a corner in earnest conversation with a monumental lady wearing too large a hat, too large a coat, and too many rings, who seemed never to lose consciousness of the gold-and-crimson vanity-bag which hung from her wrist. A forlorn-looking man with a bony face, drooping moustache and cold, lean fingers, plodded sadly through a bath-bun while he read a creased and faded newspaper long out of date; and at a table near the fire two young women kept up a breathless, hissing, secretive chatter from which emerged endlessly recurring phrases: "Well, my dear," she sez to me, she sez . . . But — now, I arsk you — what can you expect . . . "And of course," I sez, "if I was you," I sez . . .

The twilight outside pressed like soft violet wool against the glass of the windows and door behind which the drift of people and traffic moved monotonously — a blurred, endlessly revolving scene, always changing and always the same. It had been snowing listlessly all afternoon: a compound

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of mud and melted snow had gravitated to the edge of the kerbs and settled there in long, irregular pools; the air was sharp and raw, and when the teashop door swung open to admit a tall figure in hat and coat from the blue street, a chill draught slid like a ghost into the warmth within.

The young man paused uncertainly and then slunk to an empty table in the remotest corner of the shop. All, except the forlorn individual, watched him: the fat man listlessly; the monumental lady with a hard curiosity; and the two young women, suddenly ceasing their chatter, with an arch, professional interest. The removal of his hat revealed a neat golden head, smooth as a close-fitting cap, with a faultless parting and crisp ripples above the little ears; a small-featured, pink, boyish, and very sulky face, and eyes that looked once round the shop half timidly, half defiantly, and then, as he sat down, plunged at once into a book which he had taken from his pocket. He read intently and angrily as though he had been set to re-learn a lesson in which he had failed. A waitress, with an alacrity reserved for attractive males, stalked forward, amused and indulgent, to take his order. As he looked up she took a little dip into his eyes, but the gaze that met hers was severely neutral, and so was his request

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for a cup of tea. 'Ain't 'e a peach?' she remarked to one of the waitresses who stood idle at the marble counter beside the steaming hot-water urns. 'And blue eyes . . . oo, my dear!' she whispered over her shoulder, pressing a humorous hand to her heart. 'Go and have a look at them. Here's 'is cup of tea!'

The other waitress accepted the opportunity and the rest looked on with little, suppressed giggles.

Miles had left the office in a thoroughly bad temper, so bad that he could not possibly, he felt, go home. The thought of having to talk to anybody was appalling. Yet what was he to do? Walk? The thought of a lonely walk was equally appalling. Sometimes, when his temper was good, and he felt, as he generally did, pleased with life, he would walk the three or four miles from the office to his home in Kensington for the mere pleasure of moving in a crowd past enticing shop-windows and along the brink of the roaring stream of traffic. At such times the life and movement, the endlessly changing scene and his own youthful well-being roused him to such an ecstasy that he would break out into song, taking care, of course, that the song did not emerge from the general roar of the street, and hardly moving his lips for fear he might be thought to be talking to himself:

still, making the whole thing real enough to surprise himself occasionally by the fine tone and dramatic quality of his rendering of a Hans Sachs passage – better, surely, than many a performance one might hear at the Opera! But to-day the monotony of walking home along the same dreary course was not to be faced: besides, he did not want to go home, and he had turned into the tea-shop simply to escape from himself and everything else.

And Miles, as he sat there apparently devouring page after page of his book and occasionally emerging to rediscover – surprised and slightly offended, it seemed – the cup of tea before him, was taking-in nothing whatever from his reading. His mind was busy with his grievance, a grievance somewhat difficult to define and for which no one was really to blame. It had nothing to do with home or the office: it arose finally from the fact that he had accepted an invitation to dine with the Ravens that night. Miles was an absurdly shy person: a prospective party might well have been sufficient to upset him throughout the day. But the thing, in the present instance, was much more complicated. It revolved about Elinor Trenchard, the already famous young pianist, whom Miles had met at a large party at the Fieldings a fortnight ago. He had faced that

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party simply in order to meet the wonderful Elinor, though the prospect of meeting such a creature had been extremely alarming. Everybody talked of Elinor, of her marvellous playing and of her lofty insistence on playing only what and where she chose. She had refused, they said, to play the Emperor Concerto at one of the British Symphony concerts because, she said, Coates did not know how to conduct Beethoven: she would have nothing to do with Prokofiev's new Piano-forte Concerto, with the composer himself come all the way from Russia to conduct it, because, in her opinion, the music was uninteresting. One heard, too, of her extraordinary intelligence, of her brilliant conversation, and of her high-handed behaviour at social functions when she would select from the crowd the man or woman on whom her fancy happened to light and allow the rest no more than a transitory phrase accompanied by her delightful smile.

During the two or three hours before he set off for that party, Miles had sunk to the depths of disillusionment. What was the good, he asked himself, of meeting brilliant and famous persons? One had the opportunity, it is true, of seeing them and watching them, but the actual meeting was merely an embarrassed How-do-you-do, a moment's panic, an escape, and that was the end

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of it. Had he not feared the surprised curiosity of his parents, he would certainly, in his despair, have cut the party. However, he had gone, and the result had been incredible – a most disquieting, but a most rapturous evening. For Elinor's selection, that evening, had been Miles himself. He had begun with an uncomfortable and embarrassed hour. For the first half of it he had stood alone, very pink and unhappy, with eyes that shot furtively from the floor to the crowd of faces and quickly back to the floor: the rest he had spent in awkward conversation with a curious old lady in a brown-and-yellow dress, whose neck was enclosed – Miles would never forget it – in a railing of cameos and gold chains, and whose head was crowned with the strangest roll of hair like a horse-collar. Then Mrs. Fielding had swept down on him. 'Come along, Miles,' she had said; 'Miss Trenchard wants me to introduce you to her': and she had carried him off, so officially, so cold-bloodedly, that the thing seemed more like a business transaction. Miles, feeling horribly conspicuous, followed her through the crowd, meek and obedient, like a little dog on a chain.

His embarrassment drowned all consciousness of the introduction. Whether he himself had said anything, he could not remember, but he must

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have fixed his eyes, in his foolish way, on the ground, because it was not until Mrs. Fielding had vanished that he saw Elinor for the first time. She was talking to him. 'Let us go and sit in that corner,' she was saying; 'I hate crowds, don't you?' But Miles was now so occupied with Elinor herself that, as it seemed to him afterwards, he simply stared at her without reply, like a gaping schoolboy. She was so different, so startlingly and dazzlingly different, from her photographs. As in her photographs, she was exquisite, refined, like a little Dresden figure, but it was her colour that so took one by surprise. Her bright, clear complexion, the warm auburn of her hair, the inescapable blue of her eyes, came upon Miles with a shock such as he had never felt before, which flushed his face and clutched his throat and chest in a sudden breathlessness. It was Elinor, wonderful creature that she was, who saved the situation; for Miles, so far from being emboldened by her attractiveness, was only the more bewildered. But Elinor left him no space for embarrassment. As soon as she had got him to that sofa in the corner, she broke into the most delightful talk. What it was all about, Miles had not the faintest recollection: all he remembered was that he had suddenly felt completely self-possessed, had discovered that he was exchanging talk with

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a friend — frank, fresh, gay talk; amusing discoveries of shared sympathies and antipathies; downright disagreements, charmingly humorous, which made them even more intimate, somehow, than their agreements. This dazzling, famous person was actually treating him as an equal, frankly and modestly confessing to him her feelings and experiences, and questioning him, with obviously genuine interest, about his own, for all the world as if he were as important a person as herself.

Miles was enchanted, intoxicated: his colour rose, his eyes shone, every one in the world except Elinor had ceased to exist for him. It was only when people came and spoke to her, or when, waking for a moment and turning his attention outside their magic circle, he saw that inquisitive glances kept hovering about them, that his cursed bashfulness overcame him again, and he felt as though he were being towed in Elinor's triumphant wake, a timid and pitiable object, on to the platform of some packed concert-hall.

The memory of that feeling was so acutely awful that Miles awoke from his reverie and found himself in the teashop actually sweating with apprehension. Good Lord! How long had he been dreaming there and how, in the intensity of

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his unconsciousness, had he been behaving? He glanced stealthily round the shop. The same people were there and none of them was looking at him. He took out his watch. Only a quarter of an hour had passed since he came in . . . a quarter of an hour in which he had relived a whole brilliant, breathless, unbelievable evening. And at the end of that evening, as if in answer to his sudden chilling realization that he would probably never meet her again, she had invited him to go and see her, any afternoon, any evening, at her small house in Hampstead. She asked him, as she gave him her address, if he was sure he would remember it. 'Quite sure!' Miles had replied emphatically, and their eyes had met and they had laughed with a delicious, amused understanding. And then, almost before he could realize what was happening, she had left him standing there, and he saw her shaking hands with Mrs. Fielding. His eyes followed her bright head flitting like a flame among the crowded heads till it was suddenly extinguished by the doorway.

Miles had never in his life felt so utterly forsaken. He stood there shipwrecked, as it were, among that crowd of formal savages, ashamed to feel himself publicly exposed with the glow of his abandonment still upon him. A small group of

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guests was bidding good night to Mrs. Fielding. He seized the opportunity, joined the group and, shaking hands with his hostess, unobtrusively slid out.

Viewed in the cold light of the next morning, his previous night's experience had seemed ridiculous – a fever, a drunkenness – and he felt, when he thought of it, humiliated and ashamed. But the feeling faded like morning mist, and for the rest of the day and for many days afterwards the memory of it remained like a glowing focal point in his consciousness, so that, in the middle of the habitual intercourses of his daily life, he would suddenly detach himself and, as he listened to his companion of the moment, would think to himself delightedly: 'Ah, if only you knew . . .' During those days he wore a coat and hat usually reserved for smart occasions, and he twice stopped on his way home to buy himself a new tie. At home he appeared absent and distracted.

It was on the eighth day that the disaster had occurred, the day on which his chief had sent him on a special errand into the country. It was a wet, stormy morning and Miles had set off in old clothes, clumsy boots, a bedraggled waterproof and a shapeless hat. When he got back to Paddington in the afternoon the weather had cleared,

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and surely it was by the special malevolence of Fate that, as he tramped home across the Park, her voice suddenly stopped him on the bridge across the Serpentine. He had been so buried in his thoughts that he was visibly and absurdly startled, and when he had, so to speak, focused her and realized her presence his embarrassment was so patent that Elinor too was embarrassed. For a dreadful moment they faced one another in silence. Then, when they spoke, a wall of stale and commonplace politeness rose between them, across which their eyes gazed despairingly at one another like lovers divided by a rapidly widening river. It was cruel, agonizing, such a trivial yet such a tragic accident; and when they had shaken hands politely and parted, Miles went on his way chilled and disillusioned, more miserable, more humiliated than, in his short life, he had ever believed possible. What a hopeless, helpless fool he was! Naturally she must have thought that he did not want to speak to her. Even now, as he sat in the teashop, turning over page after page of his book, his heart ached with remorse, and a sudden burden in his chest made him catch his breath in a deep sigh. Then, a few days later, had come that invitation to dinner from the Ravens. Young Raven was a school friend of Miles's, but they had never yet asked him to dine with them. The

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Ravens knew Elinor, and young Raven had been at the Fieldings' party. Hence, decided Miles, putting two and two together, Elinor would be at the Ravens to-night. That undoubtedly was why they had asked him and that, certainly, was why he had accepted. He had forced himself to accept. It was, he felt, his only chance to repair their lamentable disaster. But, as the day approached, his trepidations and misgivings had increased. How unbearable it would be if again they should fail to get back to one another, if he should have to sit all evening watching her talking to strangers, meet her eyes across the dinner-table, stand near her but hopelessly apart from her in the drawing-room, see her at the end of the evening, with despair in his heart, vanish without a word or a smile. And all at once, as he lingered over his cold cup of tea, he was seized with hatred for the Ravens, for parties in general, for all well-mannered, confident, chattering people who separated him, in his idiotic shyness, from the wonderful Elinor. No, he would not go to the party: he could not face it. Besides, what would be the good? But he could not go home: that was equally certain. He would have to dine alone in town. He looked at his watch. It was twenty to seven. The tea-shop was empty: even the sad-faced man had gone. Miles paid his bill and took his miseries

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out into the street, where the endless procession still drifted monotonously onwards and the snow-flakes still fell effortlessly into the mud of the roadway.

In a corner of a small Soho restaurant Miles nursed his misery. He felt tired now and his misery was gradually fading into apathy. Life became a complete, but a comparatively endurable, blank. But the physical part of him felt an interest in food, and he indulged it — he felt, in his self-pity, that he had a right to — in choosing the strangest and most appetizing dishes. He also ordered — a thing he had never before done — half a bottle of Sauterne. And under the influence of food and drink his youthful confidence began to reassert itself. He began to pull himself together, to compel himself to face the situation practically and unflinchingly. Something definite must be done. It was too late now to go to the Ravens, but to-morrow he must screw up his courage to the point of calling on Elinor. The thought of doing so was disturbing in the extreme, and when he let his imagination play upon it, it became an agony. But he checked his imagination: he decided quite coldly that it must be done. Desperately and with his head down, as it were, he would act, ignoring all misgivings, all disturbing fancies, and chancing the result. And then for the

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first time it entered his mind that possibly Elinor was not at the Ravens' dinner-party. Very possibly she was at home. Why should he not go to see her to-night? now? Yes, he would go to-night. He would simply take himself by the scruff of the neck and dump himself on her doorstep. What better opportunity could there be than this, when his emotions were tired out and this fierce, reasoned determination was upon him? Elinor might be there or not: it was a gamble, he said to himself calmly, a sporting chance. No one in the restaurant, seeing that fresh and calm young man seated there, could have guessed how old and worldly and cynical Miles felt at that moment: all the warmth, all the humanity seemed to have been frozen out of his love-affair.

The snow had stopped when he went out into the street. The road and pavements shone wetly, and high above, under the stars, the snow-covered roofs showed grey and unsubstantial. During the journey in the tube he rigorously closed his mind to all thoughts, sitting like a stock, a stone, hard, patient, and impervious. But when the lift at Hampstead had deposited him upon the surface, the shock of a wonderfully changed external world demolished that other passionless, artificial world in which he had so

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carefully encased himself. For he stepped out of the station into a soft, pure world glistening whitely under a thick mask of snow, beautiful and unbelievable as the delicate fancies of a fairy-tale. He felt the sharp, clean air on his face, in his throat; the muffling cushion of the snow under his feet. A silent, pure, ecstatic quietude held the place in a trance that seemed immovable, eternal, and as Miles plodded noiselessly up the hill, trees, snow-laden to their smallest twigs, wove an intricate, soft filigree roof above him like the glistening crystal growths in some fabulous and unvisited cavern. And Miles, glowing and breathless with healthy exertion, felt himself released from the entanglements of his fears and despairs, changed into a bold, vigorous and happy creature with all its impulses at liberty. Even if Elinor were not at home, he thought, he would try again to-morrow, and the next day, and the next day. There was to be no trifling, no misgiving this time. He came to the little green door in the wall which she had described to him, with the name of the house painted neatly across it, and pushed it open, scraping, as he did so, a deep, fan-shaped depression in the white floor of the path. And as he shut the door again and found himself in the little square garden with its shrubs and trees, he seemed to have shut himself into a Chinese pavilion,

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delicately and intricately carved out of ivory and crystal, at the far end of which lighted window-panes shone warm and yellow through the icy air like tropical fruit. The little place stood there like some exquisite fabrication of the frost, a miraculous flower of the snow, which would dissolve before the dawn. It seemed to Miles sacrilegious to intrude on its fragile quietude and to spoil the newly strewn, immaculate floor with his footprints. On tiptoe, with fluttering heart, he followed the straight path and knocked at the door. Light footsteps ran downstairs and the door was opened by Elinor herself.

‘May I come in?’ asked Miles, almost in a whisper.

Elinor peered out at the dark figure and then, as he moved into the light from the hall, recognized him.

‘You?’ she said. ‘How delightful! Come in, come in: you must be frozen!’

She closed the door and stood before him, her bright, Dresden-china beauty ensphered in the yellow light of the hall. It was the same delicious voice, too, to which he had listened at the Fieldings so long ago, and with a sudden release of all his doubts Miles realized that all was restored to him.

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'I was afraid . . .' he began hesitatingly: 'I was afraid . . .'

'You were afraid?' said Elinor. 'So was I. I was afraid, so afraid, that you were never coming, after all!'

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THE AIR IN THE DUGOUT WAS FLAT, STALE, AND earthy, and neither warm nor cool. A single candle burned on a table, shedding a melancholy light which hardly reached to the walls of the square, low-roofed room. Along one of the walls was built a rough wooden structure, like a large, three-storied rabbit-hutch open in front, which comprised three sleeping-bunks. The beds were shallow hammocks of wire-netting, stapled along each edge to the wooden framework. The two upper bunks were empty except for a blanket and a kit-bag: in the bottom one lay a young man rolled up in a brown blanket with a coat thrown over his feet. Nothing was exposed except his brown head and a fraction of khaki shoulder. His name was Freen, and he was a platoon commander.

In a dugout it is always night. There that sense of the time of day which, under normal life, a man derives intuitively from the varied routine of his day and the degree of light or darkness, is lost. Time has stood still, it seems, at some unknown hour not far from midnight. Young Freen opened his eyes and, shaking a wrist clear of the blanket, saw that his watch was near upon seven o'clock. Up above, the sun must have set an hour ago: the men in the trench would be feeling that deso-

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late, homeless sensation which comes with returning nightfall in the line, and at the thought of it Freen felt it too. He had been trying to get a little sleep before eight-thirty, when it was his duty to take out a patrol consisting of a sergeant and eight men, to examine the state of the Boche wire. But he could not sleep. He lay with his eyes closed, trying to keep his mind empty of thought; and when thoughts came none the less, he opened his eyes and stared with a sort of sick hatred at the crass reality of the things that stood before him. Like some hateful being that no effort of his could make to flinch, each thing stared back at him, loathsome and oppressive in its inescapable familiarity. Time after time he fell into a brief doze from which he woke to a sense of something which oppressed his mind like a physical weight, and with wearying reiteration, as his mind cleared, he once again found himself faced by the impending patrol. It was horrible. Freen was not a coward. He was just as able as any of his fellow-officers to disguise his feelings under a calm exterior, and now he had not the smallest doubt that when the moment arrived he would be perfectly competent to carry out the job. In fact, he kept wishing that the moment *would* arrive. It was the suspense which was so horrible – the long inaction which separated him

from the moment, leaving him at the mercy of the physical protests which the vigorous life in him was making against the threat of extinction. He was cold, and reaching out one arm he felt for the coat at his feet and drew it up over him. That coldness, he knew well enough, was simply honest terror; and he knew too that if he did not keep his teeth clenched they would chatter, and if he relaxed the muscles of his legs they would shudder in a continuous palsy. And suddenly he felt that he was weary of keeping up this restraint. What, after all, was the point in pretending to *himself*? He relaxed his leg-muscles and felt a kind of relief in letting them obey their impulse. But he still kept his teeth clenched, for fear that, if he were to let them chatter, Dixon, his company-commander, should hear.

That reminded him of Dixon: he had forgotten that he was there; and he opened his eyes once again and glanced towards the table. Dixon was still in exactly the same attitude as half an hour ago. He was sitting, a dark heap, on the bench that divided the table from the wall: his elbows were on the table and his head in his hands. He was not reading or writing or even dozing. He was doing nothing at all but simply existing in that state of torpor which the air of a dugout always induces. It seemed to Freen, as he watched him,

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that he was waiting, patiently waiting . . . for what? For the end of the war, no doubt. Freen closed his eyes once more and began to run over again the orders for the patrol. Eight men! They expected him – those damned fools at Headquarters – to take eight men. It was easy enough to sit in a comfortable dugout or hut, well behind the front line, and issue orders; but if they would try taking a patrol or two themselves, or even come and live in the line for a day or two and get to know something about it, they would discover that to take eight men racketing about in that particular place would be sheer lunacy. The Boche was barely two hundred yards away – a bit to the left he was not more than fifty yards away and you could hear him coughing – and No-Man's Land just there was as flat as a billiard-table. Besides, anyone who had done the thing before knew what a row eight men made, even when they were trying their hardest to be quiet. 'Examine the enemy wire,' those were the orders, 'and report on its condition and whether there are any gaps.' And eight-thirty! What an hour to choose! Last night at eight-thirty it had been still clear twilight. A pretty sort of lunatic he would look leading eight men along the Boche wire, all clearly outlined against a green sky like a lot of cardboard birds and beasts in a shooting-gallery. Yes, a

shooting-gallery: that's just what it would be! His mind boiled with impotent rage against the unknown writer of the orders. Damned swine! Bloody fool! 'Skipper!' he broke out aloud, urged into speech by the violence of his feelings. 'Eight men's simply absurd!'

'What eight men?' murmured the immovable shape of Dixon.

'Why, the eight men I'm supposed to take on this damned Cook's tour along the Boche wire. I might just as well line them up in the trench and shoot them before we start.'

Dixon's only reply was a sound which might have been either a laugh or a grunt.

'They'll only be in my way,' Freen went on. 'I'd much better leave them all behind and just take Sergeant Sims.'

The object of this statement was to sound Dixon, but Dixon was not to be drawn, and so Freen went on:

'It's not as if we were supposed to be a fighting patrol. What's the good of eight men when you've got to be noiseless and invisible and keep out of trouble? Eh, Skipper?'

'To protect you, my son.'

'Protect? Why, they'll give the show away for a certainty before we get within fifty yards of the Boche line.'

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Dixon made no reply. He sat with his elbows on the table and his head in his hands, waiting for the end of the war.

'But really, Skipper,' came the voice from the bed again, 'mayn't I leave the men behind?'

'What about orders?'

'But, as you must admit, the orders are absurd. I can't think,' he broke out in exasperation, 'why they don't just tell us to get the information they want and leave it to us, who *know* something, how and when we are to get it.' He lay on his side, his head propped on his left hand, staring at Dixon. A feeling of despair was coming over him, for Dixon looked as if he were paying no attention to his troubles.

But after a moment's silence Dixon slowly raised his head. 'Well, look here,' he said. 'Take four men and leave the other four in the trench. Tell them they're to be a sort of extra sentry-post and keep a special look-out in the direction you go in.'

Freen heaved a sigh of relief. He was too tired to argue any more: but why even four men? It was just like old Dixon, always so cautious about orders, whether he saw that they were impossible or not. However, something at least had been achieved. The weight on his mind had been lightened and he turned wearily away from the

light of the candle and closed his eyes again. After all, he reflected, it was a short job. In two hours he would actually be back, lying where he was now, the whole business over. Looked at like that, the thing seemed simple. For one hour he had merely to lie still and do nothing, and during the next he had to crawl about cautiously in the dark, playing a sort of grim hide-and-seek. Yes, it was simple enough. The thought of having to take a lot of men with him had been the only trouble.

At a quarter-past eight, feeling cold and tired, he got up and began to get ready. He handed his pocket-case to Dixon and took off his identity-disc and shoulder-badges, so that if the Boche got hold of him there would be nothing on him to identify the battalion. 'My home-address is in the pocket-case,' he remarked casually. 'I shan't take my tin-hat and gas-bag: they only get in the way when it comes to crawling'; and bare-headed, with nothing but his revolver and a handful of extra rounds in his pocket, he turned to go.

Dixon looked up at him. 'Good luck!' he said, 'and mind you don't forget to have every post warned that you're going out.'

'I've already told Sergeant Sims to have that done,' Freen answered as he went out.

At the foot of the dugout stairs Sergeant Sims

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was waiting for him. 'Are the men ready?' Freen asked.

'They're waiting up in the trench, sir.'

Freen lowered his voice. 'Look here, Sims, I'm not taking out all the men. We're to leave four of them in the trench.'

'And a good job too, sir. It's pretty light upstairs.'

'Is it? *How* light?'

'Well, as you'll see, sir, a good bit too light for the job.'

Freen was silent for a moment. 'Then we'll not take the other four either,' he said. 'We'll dump them just outside our wire to wait till we come back. You and I can manage much better alone. What do you think?'

'I'm all for going out alone, sir.'

'Good. Then hadn't you better leave your rifle and get a revolver? Do as you like about your hat and gas-bag. I'm leaving mine: they're a damned nuisance when you crawl.'

As he climbed the dugout stair Freen saw a pale, translucent square of sky waiting for him at the top of it. He climbed with his body bent forward to avoid the low roof which threatened his hatless head. It was a relief, when he had stepped out into the trench, to stretch his back and shoulders and breathe in the fresh air. The evening

was clear and green: he looked at his watch and saw that even the second-hand was clearly visible. The eight men, a conglomeration of restless, murmuring shapes, stood waiting near the dugout entrance. Freen divided them into two parties and put each in charge of its senior man. Then he gave to each its orders – the one to remain on guard in the trench, the other to lie down outside our wire and keep quiet till he and the Sergeant returned. ‘And remember,’ Sims warned them, ‘if you shoot us, you’re *for* it.’ Freen was aware, whether by sympathy or some still undefined power of perception, of a slackening of tension among the men, of something like an inaudible sigh of relief, and the sense of it aroused a similar feeling in himself. He led them along the winding trench to the point from which he was to start, and having posted the party which was to remain in the trench, he and Sims with the remaining four climbed on to the parapet and began with infinite caution to pick their way through the thick tangles of wire. Every sound – each small click of a buckle against the wire, even the breathing and occasional sniffing of the men – seemed, in the night stillness, as if it must be audible for miles. It was as if the whole world were listening for them alone. How slow and clumsy they seemed, as Freen, who was the first to get through the

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wire, stood watching the five swaying shapes sharply defined in the clear green light. 'It's a wonder,' he thought, 'that they haven't spotted us already.'

At last, thank God, all were through and, finding an old shell-hole a few yards in front of the wire, Freen settled them down in it and gave them their final instructions. 'Now we're all right,' he whispered to Sims. Having got those fellows safely through the wire, the worst, he felt, was over. He and Sims began slowly to move forward, and Freen felt, as he always felt in No-Man's Land, that he was walking in some high place, exposed, as if under a searchlight, to hundreds of eyes.

After they had gone about fifty yards he stopped and Sims, who followed behind, glided up beside him like ghost meeting ghost.

'There's a hole just ahead there,' Freen whispered: 'a bit of trench. You see the chalk? May be a sap. Better get down. Follow me and if I waggle my heel, lie still.'

They dropped quietly to their hands and knees and crept forward in single file. When he was within a few yards of the chalk Freen stopped again. From where he lay he could see down into the hole. It was a small isolated trench, a motionless confusion of glimmering whiteness and black shadow. He was watching one of the shadows. It

seemed, as he stared at it, to stand out detached, blacker and more solid than the rest. Sims slid up beside him and they lay for an age, watching together. But the shadow never moved, and they began to crawl forward again. And as he crawled, Freen was thinking to himself: 'The waiting's over. Here we are, doing the job. The hour's actually running its course'; and it seemed to him that he was engaged in the performance of something unreal. He felt detached, incredulous, and, except for a sort of physical tension somewhere about the pit of his stomach, perfectly calm. He stared into the darkness ahead and it seemed to him that he could detect a vague grey hedge stretched across the world in front of him. They must be getting somewhere near the enemy wire. But next moment, at a point much farther ahead, a light shot up out of the ground and in one brief flash Freen saw the Boche wire clearly outlined against it. It was much farther away than he had thought. In an instant the light had soared upwards, filling all No-Man's Land with a staring brilliance scarred by great slashes of trembling shadows. Then it drooped and dived winking to the earth, where it lay pulsating like a dying thing ten yards from where they lay. In the ebbing brightness Freen saw a long stretch of silver-washed foreground spread out before him.

When the darkness came back it seemed much deeper than before and they crawled ahead, feeling for the first time that they were invisible. Progression by crawling is slow, and it seemed that they had covered a great distance when Freen came upon a shallow shell-hole overgrown with grass. He slid into it to rest, for the crawling was laborious work, and Sims slid in after him. 'Rest a bit,' Freen whispered in his ear, 'and see where we are.'

But it was difficult now to see anything, and Sims sat up on his heels and began to look about him. Freen, glancing up at him, saw the dark mass of his head and shoulders sway across the background of green sky.

Next minute there came three loud reports out of the darkness to their right and, following them, the hum of a flying fragment, low overhead. Hand-grenades! Had the Boche too seen something? Freen felt suddenly amused. There was something laughable in that symptom of apprehension among the invisible and inaudible folk in front of them. 'Damned bad shots, anyhow!' he whispered to Sims. But Sims was fumbling for his revolver, and it seemed to Freen extraordinary that he should be taking the thing so seriously. But next moment another flickering light shot up — how surprisingly close the wire was now

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— and, immediately after, a terrific pulsating din burst upon them. It stopped, and Freen heard an electric bell jangling loudly and furiously. It filled the night. He was astounded, terrified. It was the unaccountableness of the thing that terrified him. But in a few seconds he had understood, for the sound was already becoming less real. It was his ear, his right ear, ringing and jangling, half-deafened by the splitting noise of the machine-gun. He could feel the numbness of it now, thick, wadded, as if filled with clay.

They lay flattened on to the ground, immovable, waiting. But they had not to wait long. After a brief pause the machine-gun opened up again. It was immediately in front of them and, it seemed, only a few yards away. Freen could feel a beating in the grass a few inches from his head. It was the bullets striking the earth. They lay, he and Sims, flattened into their shell-hole like two large fish in a soup-plate. Then again there came silence — vast, overwhelming silence — and they listened with all their ears for what might happen next. Would a party be sent out through the wire to look for them? If it came to that they would have to run for it. For the first time the thought came to Freen that this was deadly earnest and it was quite likely that he and Sims would never get back to the company. But no new sound came: only a

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sense that eyes were riveted on the spot where they lay, watching for the smallest movement. They lay still as dead men and time flowed over their heads: how much time they never knew. But at last, when all had been quiet for an age and the length of time for which a man would continue to watch seemed to be past, Freen turned his head and whispered to Sims, 'We'll crawl! Keep quite flat!' and he began to slue himself round like a snake. Slowly and noiselessly they drew themselves along with their arms, crooking the right leg sideways and sliding their bodies along with the right knee pivoted on the ground.

And so they crawled till they were exhausted. After a short rest they rose on their hands and knees and did another fifty yards. By that time it seemed that the Boche was far behind them, and they rose stiffly to their feet and walked upright. How secure they felt now: and yet at that point on their way out they were creeping carefully on hands and knees. Freen kept bearing to his right. By doing so, he knew he would strike a broken railway which ran straight back to their own wire; and soon they struck it and walked boldly ahead following the line of it.

Suddenly there was a movement and a hiss in front of them.

'All right! All right! It's us!' said Freen aloud,

for he had heard a sharply-whispered 'Who's that!' and knew at once that they were already reaching their first party of men. He chuckled to himself. The fellow, by the sound of his whisper, had been quite scared. And yet what was there to be scared about at that distance from the Boche? 'Come on!' he said to them. 'Get up! What's the matter with you?'

The men climbed stiffly to their feet and Freen led the way through the wire. Five minutes later he was through it and stood on the parapet. White faces under helmets stared up at him: he saw the gas-masks on their chests and their bayonets pointing sharp out of the trench, and it seemed to him extraordinary that men should be watching, alert and fully armed, in a place which seemed to him now so absolutely secure. He stooped forward and, putting one hand on the shoulder of the sentry below him, jumped down on to the fire-step beside him. Bare-headed, stripped of everything but his revolver, he felt happy, careless, secure. Life pulsed in a warm flood through his body and limbs. He stretched himself and breathed-in the familiar, earthy smell of the trench. The night air was cool and fresh on his face, and it seemed to him at that moment that he was at the very summit of health and manhood. He waited till the last man had jumped down into

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the trench and then turned with Sims towards Company Head-quarters. 'What we want now, Sims,' he said, 'is a drink.'

When they had scrambled down into the snug, good-smelling dugout, Freen took a deep breath. 'Well,' he said to the Sergeant, 'that's done!' and he groped along the dim tunnel to the officers' mess. Dixon was sitting at the table waiting for the end of the war. He looked up as Freen entered. 'Well, thank God for that!' he said in his quiet, tired voice. 'I was beginning to wonder if I ought to expect you.'

'Why not?'

'Why not? Well, we heard you having high jinks out there. When the sentry heard those bombs he came down and mentioned it to me, and I got up in time for the machine-gun display. I've been hanging about up there for an hour. I gave you an hour and a half. After that I began to think you'd stopped a packet.'

'What I want,' said Freen, 'is a drink. Is there anything?'

'There's a bottle of *vin rouge* that the Quartermaster-Sergeant brought up with the rations. You can have that.'

Freen opened the bottle, poured out two tumblers full, and carried them out. 'Sims!' he shouted into the dark.

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Sims's voice answered down the tunnel and, a moment after, he appeared. Freen handed him one of the tumblers, and drank off his own at a single gulp.

SIR POMPEY AND MADAME JUNO

EVERYBODY — ALL THE STAFF, THAT IS, AND THE regular customers — knew Sir Pompey. For years he had dined at the Langouste. He had his own sacred table there, a little table for two which he occupied alone, except when he brought a guest. His entry and his exit always made a little stir. As he toddled in, he paused ceremoniously to grasp with the tips of his fingers the hand of the *patronne*, who sat enclosed like a coloured wax bust in her glass-case, before he passed on to where Jean, his own particular waiter, would relieve him of his coat, and Henri, the wine-waiter, of his hat and cane. It was always as if he had just returned from a long absence. And always, either before sitting down at his own table or, afterwards, before going out, he would turn to exchange a word or two at one of the other tables — first a few general remarks to all and then half-whispered confidences with the ladies, sympathetic inquiries, understanding advice, it seemed, about private feminine matters; and always, to finish with, a comic remark accompanied by a gesture or a grimace, under cover of which he took flight, leaving titters behind him.

His name and occupation were unknown. It was one of the other old stagers who had, years

before, christened him Sir Pompey, because that was obviously his fitting name – so obviously that it spread inevitably from group to group and had long since become the common property of every one excepting Sir Pompey himself. The theories about him were various. Some would have it that he was a retired actor, still vaguely connected with the theatre; others that he was a baronet of ancient family who had wildly squandered a fortune and now lived a secluded life in a flat in Shaftesbury Avenue; others again that he ‘travelled’ in the more expensive varieties of ladies’ underwear. His appearance partly supported all these views. He was under the average height, and in the matter of age he hovered indefinitely between fifty and seventy. Beneath his iron-grey hair, with its wide pink parting, a deeply grooved forehead sloped out to two bushy eyebrows. Two small, sharp eyes kept watch on either side of a fine proboscis of a nose. It was the lower part of his face that alternately shook all the theories about him, for his clean-shaved mouth was large and unstable, and now Sir Pompey would set it sternly into a line of legal determination, now he would allow it as it were to fall to pieces, loosely, baggily, into a spectacle of pathetic weakness. His chin struck you at once by its absence. In the rapidly retreating slope from his nether lip to his collar stud

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there was a small convex pouch: nothing more. His tailor was obviously a good one, and he was conspicuous always for his immaculate collar and cuffs, the small diamond pin in his black satin tie, and his light-grey bowler and spats. A great problem, vague, baffling but for that inspired certainty that his ideal name, whatever his actual name, was Sir Pompey.

Another element in the mystery was his occasional absences for a month or six weeks and his intimate references in conversation to Paris, Rome, Vienna, and Constantinople. A conundrum! A prodigy! But faithful always to the Langouste. And the Langouste was faithful to him. If it was his own particular restaurant, he was its own particular customer. No wonder, then, that Jean appeared conscience-stricken when Sir Pompey toddled in, punctual to the second, on that memorable evening.

‘Very sorry, sir. Very full to-night, sir.’ Jean, murmuring in his broken English, paused while Sir Pompey presented his fingers to the *patronne* and then followed him to his accustomed corner.

There the reason for his embarrassment was immediately obvious. A large and resplendent lady occupied one of the two chairs at Sir Pompey’s sacred table – a lady like a queen, though (to define her more closely) a touring-company

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queen rather than a reigning sovereign. She was one of those women who sit very high: upright, formidable, over-decorated, like some Indian goddess. She was enclosed, it seemed, in coat upon coat, scarf upon scarf, all thrown liberally open to display the well-filled jumper. Only a painter could do justice to her hat. She seemed, enthroned there, to involve the whole table: it appeared unlikely that there would be any room at all for Sir Pompey.

‘Hope you don’t mind, sir!’ Jean whispered, drawing out Sir Pompey’s chair for him.

‘Mind, my good friend?’ replied Sir Pompey aloud, with a little bow to the queen. ‘How could I mind when you invite me to sit opposite a lady who, I see, is both beautiful and virtuous!’

The lady smiled with dignity, shrugged, and glanced away to the left.

‘But does the *lady* mind, Jean?’ continued Sir Pompey. ‘*That*, surely, is what we should ask ourselves.’ He glanced at the queen with another little bow. ‘Does the *lady* mind?’ he repeated.

The lady pursed a large, flamboyant mouth. ‘Oh, no. Not at all,’ she replied detachedly on a subdued chest-note.

Sir Pompey sat down, rubbing his hands together and sucking in his breath between closed teeth. Then, fixing an eyeglass into his right eye, he

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scanned the menu which Jean had set before him. 'What do you recommend, my friend?' he asked.

Jean, bending to Sir Pompey's ear, murmured advice.

'Or perhaps you, madam, will advise me?' Sir Pompey suddenly raised his head and screwed up his face so that the eyeglass fell out of his eye. The lady gave a little contralto shriek, followed by a brief giggle; but the eyeglass was safely attached to a ribbon, and Sir Pompey was staring at her, awaiting the answer to his question.

'Oh, I'm sure I don't know, what with these French words and the bad writing.'

'Quite! Quite!' Sir Pompey sympathized. 'But what, if I may ask, have *you* ordered? That . . . er . . . would surely . . . er . . .'

'Me? Oh, I'm having one of these Chatto Breeongs. It's just steak, you know.'

'Ah! So you're plunging at once *in medias res*, so to speak?'

The lady shook her head. 'Fraid I don't speak it. But the steak's good here; I know that much.'

'Very true. Very true, madam. But I feel, I really do feel, that you were wrong not to begin with a *sole Colbert*.'

The lady lifted condescending eyebrows. 'And what is that, if I may arsk?'

'Well . . .! Well . . .!' Sir Pompey peered

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about as if hoping to find a written description of *sole Colbert* ready to hand. 'Well, imagine to yourself, my dear lady, a sole exquisitely fried, in which, during the . . . er . . . the process of frying, an incision has been made. Into this incision just before serving, they drop a lump of *grr . . . een* butter. The result, believe me, is . . . !' and Sir Pompey, with both palms raised, made as if to push away from him something too rapturous to contemplate. 'Now, if I might advise,' — he became intimately confidential — 'you will postpone your . . . your Chateaubriand and order, as I am doing, a *sole Colbert*.'

The lady raised her shoulders and rolled her fine eyes to the right. 'Well,' she replied in her rich contralto, 'I don't mind.'

Sir Pompey gave the order. 'Believe me, Madame Juno, you will not repent it.'

The lady's pupils sharpened; she seemed suddenly to be regarding Sir Pompey from a great distance. But Sir Pompey raised deprecating paws. 'Now, you mustn't be cross with me,' he pleaded. 'Most ladies would consider it a compliment to be called Madame Juno. Juno, as you know, was a goddess and queen of the Roman heaven, and it popped out, you see, before I knew where I was. The likeness, if I may say so, was so striking. You know Naples? The Museo Nazionale? No? Ah

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well: if you'd been to the Museo Nazionale at Naples you'd see at once what I mean. But you'd *love* Naples, my dear lady. *Vedi Napoli*, you know, *e poi muori*. So, you see, you must not take it amiss if I name you after a queen. Although, admittedly, there are queens and queans. Some queens have been content to remain merely queens; others, history tells us, have preferred to combine the queen with the quean. One recalls Messalina, Catherine the Great, Mary Queen of Scots, Tamar Queen of Georgia, not to mention all those others of which you, with your better memory, will doubtless remind me. All of which goes to prove that vowels, Madame Juno, are more important than some of our friends would have us believe.'

Madame Juno eyed Sir Pompey with indulgent tolerance. 'Well,' she said, 'I suppose you can't help it, but I haven't an *idea* what you're talking about.'

Sir Pompey flung up his hands in despair. 'You mean to say,' he exclaimed, 'that I don't make myself clear?'

Madame Juno's lips curled to a slightly scornful smile. 'Clear!' she said. 'I like that. You see,' she explained, 'you're a bit of a character, that's what it is.'

'A character!' wailed Sir Pompey. 'I call her a queen, Jean, and she replies that I am a character.'

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Jean, serving the Chateaubriand, smiled impartially at both. 'At least, let us hope,' went on Sir Pompey, 'not a *bad* character!'

A chuckle was heard somewhere deep down in Madame Juno's jumper. 'I'm not so sure about that!' she replied archly.

Sir Pompey woefully shook his head. '*Too* bad! *Too* bad! What have I done, Madame Juno, that you should give me a bad character?' He gazed up at her mournfully like a begging lap-dog.

'Oh, *I* didn't give it you: not me.' The lady's voice rose on a titter: 'If you've got one, you brought it with you'; and suddenly she began to shake all over. The glasses and cutlery jingled on the table.

'A hit! A palpable hit!' piped Sir Pompey, softly clapping his hands. 'Madame Juno, I confess myself beaten.' He pressed his hands to the left side of his waistcoat to indicate the locality of the wound. Then, beckoning to Henri, he ordered a bottle of Pommard. 'Unless' — he turned to Madame Juno — 'you prefer Barsac?'

'I leave it to you,' she replied. '*You* know what's good; I've found out that much.'

Sir Pompey's mouth wavered loosely into a smile. 'But how charming of you to say so! Burgundy of one sort or another is a necessity

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with beef or mutton. Of course, if we were in Dijon, Madame Juno, at the Trois Faisans, you would, I am sure, urge me to order a bottle of Chambertin. But in this barbaric country, whose inhabitants swill beer and stout and the odious spirit called whisky, we must console ourselves with what I know too well to be a very indifferent Pommard. I hope, Madame Juno, that you share my horror of our British drinks?’

Madame Juno turned a more interested gaze on Sir Pompey. ‘Well,’ she replied, ‘I must say I don’t mind a Guinness.’

‘Pah! A black drink!’ It was as if Sir Pompey were spitting out the loathsome liquid. ‘An opaque, black drink, dear lady, even though the flavour were divine, is an abomination. A drink should be rosy or golden, distilled sunlight, essence of the South. Don’t dare, Madame Juno, to look me in the face and tell me you don’t long for the South!’

Madame Juno considered the matter. ‘Not now!’ she said. ‘London for me, in the winter. In the summer it’s different. Last summer I was at Brighton for a month. Know Brighton at all?’

Sir Pompey sighed. ‘When we visit Brighton to-day,’ he said, ‘we visit it a hundred years too late.’

‘Well, say what you like’ – Madame Juno spoke

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with some heat – ‘Brighton’s good enough for me. Anyhow, you must admit there’s not much wrong with the Metropole?’

‘Not *much*, perhaps, but certainly, I feel, *something*.’

‘Well,’ Madame Juno confessed, ‘perhaps, after all, I may be prejudiced. You see, I was born in Brighton.’

‘Brighton your native place? My dear Madame Juno, you have humanized Brighton for me in a single phrase.’

Madame Juno, forgetting her lofty airs, bent earnestly forward. ‘You remember Victoria Terrace? Well, we lived there, Mother and me, after Father died. Of course Victoria Terrace was smarter then than it is now. Our rooms were as nice rooms as you’d see anywhere. The first floor, back and front, used to let for three guineas a week in the season.’ She heaved a sigh. ‘It’s strange to walk past the house now. I passed it last summer with the friend I was at the Metropole with.’ Her lips on the word *friend* closed into the form of a crimson orchid. ‘Of course,’ she went on, ‘I didn’t say anything to *him*. He wasn’t the sort, you know, that you could mention anything like that to.’

‘But you mention it to me, Madame Juno!’

‘Yes, I mention it to you, because, though I

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must say you do run on in the strangest way, I knew from the first minute that you were the right sort.'

Sir Pompey leaned over and patted her hand. 'I hope I am, dear lady. Sincerely, I hope I am. A good sort, but, unhappily, a bad lot! At least, many people would call me so.'

Madame Juno made a gesture of impatience. 'What does it matter?' she said. 'What I look at is whether a person is the right sort or the wrong sort. It's the only real difference. There's any amount of people that you might call bad lots that have hearts of gold, as the saying is, when you come to know them, but anyone that's not a good sort — well, he can be as . . . well . . .'

'As irreproachable as Sir Galahad . . .'

'Yes, and he's none the better for it.'

'You're right, Madame Juno. If the heart's in the right place, everything else ceases to matter.' Sir Pompey laid a hand on his waistcoat. 'My heart, I hope, is in the right place; and so, I'm sure,' — his eyes rested, with a moment's uncertainty, on the capacious jumper — 'is yours. But why is it, I keep wondering, that we have never met here before? You are an habituée?'

For a moment Madame Juno's eyes narrowed again. Sir Pompey explained. 'You come here, I mean to say, often?'

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'No. Only once before. Last week, with a friend.' Again on the word *friend* the large lips pouted into a fantastic flower.

'And you found it so much to your liking that you returned?'

'Yes . . . es!' she admitted majestically. 'These French places generally have good cooking, I find. They do things more shick than we do, don't they?'

'More . . . ?'

'Well, you know what I mean. More natty, so to speak.'

'So you love good food, Madame Juno?'

'Oh, well . . . !' Madame Juno shied at the confession.

'Never be ashamed of loving good food, dear lady. It is only the vulgar who are indifferent to what they eat. Good food, good wine, poetry, music, pictures . . . !' Sir Pompey waved a fluent hand as if in the very act of conducting a magic symphony which would transform the Langouste into a palace of the Muses.

Madame Juno set one noble elbow on the table. 'Do you go to the pictures much?' she asked.

Sir Pompey paused, arrested in the midst of his glowing creation. 'The . . . er . . . ? Ah, the films, the cinematograph, the moving pictures! Often too moving, don't you think? *Palpitante novità*, as

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the Italians say. No, no . . . no . . . not often. I miss the spoken word. These close-ups and fade-outs, these "most disastrous chances," these "moving accidents by flood and field," these "hairbreadth 'scapes i' the imminent deadly breach," ' – the table shook under his rising eloquence – 'they bother me, dear lady: they bamboozle me. I am befogged, bogged, bewildered by the scurry and crash of incident. And, after all, what *per se* is incident?' He stared helplessly at Madame Juno.

'Don't arsk me,' she trolled, resting round, amused eyes on Sir Pompey as on a performing rat.

'It is *nothing*, madam,' asserted Sir Pompey. 'A mere vehicle: no more. That plate!' He tapped her plate with his fork. 'Yet what, Madame Juno, is the plate without the *pêche Melba*? It's necessary? Oh, I *grant* you it's necessary. But without the . . . er . . . *pêche* – the delicacy, whatever it may be, what *is* it?'

Madame Juno gazed dreamily at her already empty plate. 'Not much!' she said in a dry voice.

Sir Pompey followed her gaze. 'Another?' he cried. '*Do* have another!'

Madame Juno shook her head. 'I wish I could,' she said.

'But you can't?'

Again she shook her head. 'I've got to go

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careful,' she said. 'Getting so stout, you see. Why, if you'd seen me only a year ago: I was a mere *slyph*!'

'You were *thin*? *Tant pis*. You have told me, dear lady, the one thing that consoles me for not having met you a year ago.'

'Then you don't like thin people?'

'Not thin ladies. But you'll have some coffee?'

'Not for me, thanks. I never could.'

'It keeps you awake?'

'Not that so much. It . . . well . . . ' — she patted her chest — 'it makes me bilious, you know.'

While Madame Juno had been eating her *pêche Melba*, Sir Pompey had drunk a cup of coffee and smoked a small cigar. Now he raised a finger. 'Jean! *L'addition*.'

But Jean was busy with another party, and when at last he ran up with pencil and pad Sir Pompey was absorbed in studying the next table. Jean stood doubtful, waiting. Then he glanced at Madame Juno. She nodded. 'Together!' she whispered.

When Sir Pompey had received his change, he drained his glass and became again absorbed in his neighbours. But not for long. He was roused by the voice of Madame Juno. 'Hadn't we better be moving?' she said.

Sir Pompey awoke and, leaning across the table,

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smiled and shook a finger at her. 'Madame Juno,' he said, 'you are not so artless as you would have us believe. That discreet plural was a masterpiece!'

Madame Juno gathered up her embroidered silk bag. 'Well, artful or not,' she said, 'I'm not artful enough to know what you're talking about, half the time!'

She floated up the room, a sloop-of-war under full sail, Sir Pompey bobbing like a little pinnacle in her wake. Jean swung the door open and, as Madame Juno passed out, Sir Pompey spoke into his ear. 'My friend,' he murmured, 'I was wrong. The lady is beautiful, but *not* virtuous!' and he tiptoed out.

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'PROMISE ME,' SAID LEESON, LEANING ACROSS THE lunch-table, 'that you'll stop me if I become unbearable. You see, normally I lead such a silent life. I have no friends here. Oh, acquaintances, of course; but not one real friend, nobody that I can talk to. That's why meeting you again after all these years has set me off like this. You are surprised, naturally. In the old days I hardly spoke at all, did I? and even when I did, I never spoke my mind. I was inarticulate, bottled-up in those days – smothered under loads of shyness. What an ass I must have seemed! What an ass, in fact, I really was! And so I am still; but a different kind of ass nowadays. I have learnt by this time to know myself better. Self-knowledge – that is the only good that emerges, among so much that is bad, from a lonely life. Oh, I fully admit that I have no one to blame but myself for my loneliness. A cathedral town is generally a sleepy sort of place, but in a sleepy place there are always friendly people – conventional, of course; but I'm conventional myself. The cathedral organist, you see, is *ex officio* the musical pundit of the countryside, and when I first came here quite a pleasant little society was waiting for me with open arms. But as soon as callers began to arrive, all my old

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shyness and fears were up in arms. And when invitations came I funk'd them. It was the rarest thing in the world for me to screw my courage up to the point of accepting one, and so in the end people got tired of asking me. Soon I had succeeded – as, Heaven knows how unwillingly, I succeeded at Cambridge and everywhere else – in forming a vacuum round myself.

‘It’s an amazing thing, Oliver – a thing I have never yet managed to understand. Why should some of us be created apparently for no other object than to be our own worst enemies? Look at me, for instance. I really rely tremendously on others: I have an immense need of companionship and affection: my desires are all outwards, not inwards: and yet, whenever these things are put within my reach, some irresistible weakness cripples me just as surely as if the hand I was going to stretch out were suddenly paralysed. And that’s not the only effect of this absurd impotence. It not only prevents my advancing, but also, when I *have*, on rare occasions, succeeded in overcoming it, it takes its revenge by making me ridiculous in the eyes of the very people with whom I want to appear to advantage. Lord! How often I have cursed my idiotic weakness! It was the same when I was a boy at school, and the same, as you remember, at Cambridge. Why, it

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was only by accident, after all, that I got to know *you*. Don't apologize, Oliver. I know well enough what really happened that day you gave me such a fright in the organ-loft. It was your fatal love of music that let you down that time. You happened to be passing the chapel at the moment and you heard someone playing the D minor Toccata, so you went in to listen. And then, wondering who on earth it could be who was playing so remarkably well (you see, Oliver, I don't *entirely* despise myself nowadays), you thought you would sneak up the stairs of the organ-loft to find out. You must have come up very quietly, because I didn't hear a sound. Tennis-shoes, perhaps? I *thought* so. Suddenly I caught sight of your face appearing round the corner of the organ-case. I nearly jumped out of my skin. And how annoyed you were at being discovered! Oh, it's no good denying it: I remember your face. You thought for a moment of bolting, but, for some reason, you hesitated, and next moment you felt that it was too late, and so you came round and stood beside me. You were in shorts and a blazer and looked very superior. I knew you quite well by sight: you were one of the vigorous, games-playing crowd that I always regarded with fear and admiration. And you, of course, like everyone else, looked on me as a freak; but you did not

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like to be rude even to a freak, so you sat down on the stool beside me and asked me to go on with the Toccata. I was pleased at that, because organ-playing was the one thing in which I felt quite certain that I was superior to most people. When I had finished the Toccata, I asked you if I should do the Fugue. You nodded, and I saw in your face that you were really impressed by my playing. I played one thing more, I forget what, and then you asked me to play the A minor Prelude and Fugue. That was your undoing, Oliver: because it gave me an opportunity and, for a wonder, I actually took it. Do you remember? I hadn't the A minor with me, "but I've got it in my room," I told you, "and if you . . ." Good Lord! I remember to this day my panic at this unprecedented boldness . . . "if you would come round this evening I'll play it for you, after a fashion, on the piano."

'I never thought you would come, Oliver. Once out of the loft, *that*, I thought, would be the end of you. But to my surprise and delight you turned up in the evening, and that gave me a firmer hold on you. I was desperate, you see, like a spider who has stuck his web in the wrong place and sits waiting in vain for flies. You, Oliver, were my unique fly, and I was determined to hold on to you for all I was worth. Several

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times, later, you tried, didn't you? to let our acquaintanceship lapse. Now, don't deny it. I could give you chapter and verse — remind you of each occasion in all its details. We solitary folk have prodigious memories for anything like that, you know. You must often have wondered why I held on to you so pertinaciously, because we got along, on the whole, very badly, didn't we? I irritated you horribly, and no wonder; and though your kindness of heart prevented you from abandoning me, it did not prevent you from turning on me when your patience was finally exhausted and telling me I was an infernal ass. About every other day you used to point out to me quite clearly that I was an ass. I never attempted to defend myself. In the first place, I didn't know how to argue in those days; and even if I had, I didn't believe in myself enough to dare to uphold any opinion of mine that anyone contradicted. Besides, I didn't want to annoy you: I was willing to stand anything from you so long as I could keep you. I was really almost in love with you in those days. You represented, you see, my sole contact with humanity outside my family. I remember several of those times when you turned on me. Once we had been talking of . . . I don't remember what . . . pictures, carpets, decoration? I don't know; anyhow, we got on to the subject of

colour. "Well, of course," I remember saying, "*I don't like bright colours.*" That made you very angry. "How can you say you dislike bright colours?" you said. "It's absurd. You might as well say you dislike loud music." I murmured something about that being different. "No, it isn't," you snapped. "It's exactly the same. I could understand it if you objected to certain bright colours in a certain place, just as I might dislike a loud passage in a certain Beethoven Symphony: but to say, wholesale, that you dislike bright colours is just as silly as to say that you dislike loud music."

"On another occasion we were in the chapel, looking down from the organ-loft. The chapel, I remember, delighted you from that point of view, and you were praising the Wren reredos. "Well, of course," I objected, "*I don't care for marble.*" That set you off again and you gave me a tremendous dressing. Whether what you actually said was justifiable or not I don't remember, but at least, knowingly or unknowingly, you had in your fury got at the essential, which was that bright colour and hard marble were just what my personality lacked. Yes, you must have suffered much from me in those days, Oliver, but at least your suffering was in a good cause. You made life bearable for me at Cambridge. Without you I

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should have been completely walled up in my shell. As it was, I enjoyed, through you, a pale, vicarious participation in the jolly side of Cambridge life. When you used to come into my rooms and begin arguing and swearing and knocking things about, I used to feel marvellously refreshed and released. You gave me back my self-respect, so long as you didn't tell me too often, and with too much fury and conviction, that I was an ass. With such a normal, healthy creature as you were I had the inexpressible consolation of feeling normal too. You see, I wasn't reserved and tame and silent from choice. It was as though I were somehow muted, gagged, crippled by some mental deformity from which I could not break free. It was the same with games. I did not avoid them because I disliked them. On the contrary, I longed to be able to play them. It was fear, not dislike. I was frightened of them — but not of being knocked about or hurt. No, I was just mortally afraid of making a fool of myself. I was too self-conscious: I had none of that direct animal energy which finds its natural expression in sports. I hadn't the single-minded passion in pursuit of a football or hockey-ball which makes the athletic youngster as sure and inevitable as the ball itself. My mind would have been occupied with the comic ungainliness of my run, the certainty that

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every one was laughing at me. And, of course, I was right. I *was* ungainly and ridiculous, and if I had tried to play football every one *would* have laughed at me, undoubtedly. I see myself doing it: a series of lamentable antics, enough to make a dog laugh. But which, I have often wondered, came first? Was it my shivering self-consciousness that produced the clumsiness, or the clumsiness that destroyed my nerve? It seems unjust, doesn't it? that a boy's life should be made miserable to him by these strange inner schisms, these hopeless incompatibilities between the desire and the physical skill to accomplish the desire. So you see, games were the supreme and inescapable evidence of my defeat, my humiliation. Naturally, I hated them. And I hated them still more after I got to know you, because they were always reminding me that I was not, really, your companion and your equal — that there was a whole delightful world into which you could escape from me, and when I used to meet you in shorts and a sweater hurrying off with some other brawny fellow to play football, I felt contemptible, forlorn, and devoured with jealousy. I daren't have spoken to you on those occasions. However, I too had another world in which I used to disport myself. I used to compose. You didn't know I used to compose in those days? No, of course you didn't.

Do you think I would have told you? Not likely! I was much too ashamed. Before setting to work I used to sport my oak and always, when I had finished, I locked away every scrap of manuscript. Not that I thought my compositions bad. On the contrary, I thought them very good. And so they were – quite good, some of them: I was looking over a few the other day. No, I'm wrong. It wasn't that I was ashamed. I was afraid, afraid of exposing something that was so undisguisedly and vulnerably *myself*. Of course you might have liked them. That would have been wonderful: but the risk was too great.'

As if embarrassed by the nakedness of his confession, Leeson changed his attitude, clasping his hands round his knees.

'Nowadays? Oh, no; never. I gave up composing years ago. After all, what was the good of it? I am speaking, of course, from my own point of view. There's no one, you know, so self-centred as your hermit. From the point of view of society it is, I suppose, a good thing that music should be written, provided it's good music. But, for myself, I began to see after a time that all this writing of poetry, music, philosophy, whatever you like, is only the hermit's substitute – a poor, pale, unsatisfying substitute – for living your life. Life – the healthy external life – has always eluded

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me: or rather — I admit it — it is I that have eluded life. When I came to realize that, when I saw that my life was mere ink and paper and decorative sounds strung together by intellectual subtilities, all my pleasure in composition evaporated. The substitute was too thin, too bloodless to be worth having. If I couldn't have life, I would have nothing. That sounds, perhaps, like a spoilt child who throws away his apple because he can't have a peach. Perhaps it was. But, as a matter of fact, once I had made that discovery, once composition had lost its worth in my eyes, I ceased to be *able* to compose. So now, you see, I have neither the peach nor the apple. And I suppose I shall never get the peach. I am no nearer to life now than I was as a youth, because I still retain my damning disabilities.

'Oh, yes: you find me changed, no doubt. I *have* changed, I know. In the first place, I have at least become conscious of my disabilities. That means that I have to some extent detached myself from them. And I have progressed even farther than that, as you are discovering — poor Oliver! — to your cost. I have even got to the point of discussing them. When last we met I would have died rather than admit them to anyone but myself. Yes, it is a good symptom, undoubtedly, that I can talk about them like this. Still, I'm rather afraid that my garrulousness about them springs

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more from the shamelessness of despair than from the courage of detachment. Oh, no, I don't want to make out that my life is nothing but unmitigated misery. That would be sheer misrepresentation. Music, after all, is my great hobby, and I get plenty of it here. Besides that, this lovely old place still delights me. Oh, undoubtedly I get some satisfaction out of the minor details, but in the supreme concern of life I really am pretty close to despair, or if not despair, at least to resignation, which is worse, because resignation means acquiescence in failure.

'At first I was really happy here. The first few weeks, in fact, were the happiest time of my life. The place enchanted me. Why is it so satisfying to live in a beautiful old town? The whole tone of my life was changed. An internal peace came upon me, a physical and mental well-being. In London the old and beautiful are rare: one comes upon them seldom as the result of a happy accident or deliberate search. For weeks together, when I lived there, I saw nothing but the commonplace, the dull, the mean, till at last, depressed beyond endurance, I used to hurry for an antidote to St. Stephen's Walbrook, St. Magnus Martyr's, or to those dark Gothic nooks behind the altar in Westminster Abbey. But when I came here I found myself surrounded by beauty. It delighted

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me, in the first weeks, to wake in the morning and try, with closed eyes, to remember where I was. I knew somehow that I was not in London. There was a strangeness about me. Was it, I tried to guess, a pleasant or unpleasant strangeness? Then memory rushed back and I opened my eyes and felt with a thrill the new room and the new circumstances assembling about me. Opposite me, framed in the mullioned window opposite my bed, I saw the high Norman gable of the north transept and the great four-turreted central tower. The four gilded vanes on the tower filled me with glee. On sunny mornings they were four little dazzling flames. I used to lie and watch the jackdaws settle on the roofs and pinnacles or launch themselves into the air, swirling upwards, downwards, or right round the tower, as though they were swimming. Their hoarse cries, sometimes separate, sometimes breaking out all together in a sudden gust of laughter, came in through the open window. It was delicious. I lay absorbed in watching them, identifying myself with their movements. It was as good as a bathe in the sea, and much less trouble: I always hated bathing. Oh, yes: it was delightful here at first. And it was not only the wonderful old place itself. My work was interesting, too. The organ was far finer than the one I had had in London, the choir was good,

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and I was allowed a very free hand with the music. My troubles began, as I told you just now, over the social side of my new life. People began to call: quite a number came: and at that my absurd shyness at once began to torture me again. I was assailed by a perfect agony of nervousness whenever, during calling-hours, the front-door bell rang. Sometimes I fled in panic upstairs, telling Mrs. Parker to say I was not at home. Even when I *did* succeed in forcing myself to face them, it was almost as bad in the end, because I made such a mess of it; and when all was over and the callers gone I used to sit, living over again every circumstance, every phrase of conversation, consumed with shame at the recollection. Then, when invitations came, all my shames and fears sprang into frenzied activity. I kept telling myself that now was my only chance, that if I let these new opportunities slip, I should land myself in the vacuum in which I have always landed myself before. But I couldn't face the ordeal. It must sound to you, Oliver, ridiculous to the last degree; but I used to sit at my desk with an invitation before me, trying to screw myself up to accepting it and actually sweating from the mental conflict. Sometimes I compelled myself to write an acceptance, but when the moment came, my courage failed and I daren't go. And with each failure,

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each new submission to my weakness, I felt that I was more and more losing control of myself, making it more and more hopelessly impossible for me to save the situation. I can't tell you what I suffered during that time. And yet, to a man with any guts, the thing would have been at the worst a matter of tiresome routine and, more probably, actually enjoyable. Well, as I have told you already, the inevitable occurred. Before long I was back in my old vacuum, face to face with my own contemptible self.

‘What a horrible thing loneliness is, not only in itself but in its consequences! For weeks on end, except for a few words with Mrs. Parker and in the course of my duties, I led a completely silent, lonely life. The daytime was not so bad: I was fairly occupied then. Services, choir-practices, my own organ-practising and a certain amount of clerical work kept me fairly busy till teatime: but after that, work was over and I was faced by the awful vacuity of my life. I used to sit, too acutely miserable to read, listening to the unbearable silence and longing for something, anything, to happen. As the time got towards half-past five I used to listen for the postman as if my life depended on his coming, and when I heard the thud of the gate and footsteps coming up the walk my heart used to leap with anticipation. Even if

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he brought me only a circular or a bill I felt somehow consoled: and whenever half-past five went by and he did not come, I was bitterly disappointed. I got to hate Sundays, because on Sundays there was no post and so I had nothing to look forward to but just the horrible certainty that nothing *could* happen. Gradually I formed the habit of rummaging about in my mind, analysing my feelings and moods, and the more I probed and analysed the more complex and unaccountable the moods became. I began to notice that my body reacted to my mental states or took on morbid moods of its own. Sometimes my heart would accelerate for no apparent reason – I used rather to enjoy the thick, slightly oppressive feeling it produced just below the throat: sometimes, after a bout of depression, I would suddenly be assailed by that feverish, hypersensitive feeling and the dazed swimming of the head which are generally the symptoms of 'flu or a chill. Soon I began to take a perverse pleasure in this morbid self-scrutiny. But the pleasure never lasted long: it always ended in a horrible fit of the blues. Yes, the evenings were a nightmare: I began to look forward to them with terror. One day it entered my head to take refuge in alcohol. As you know, I always hated wine and spirits. You used to laugh at me at Cambridge, I remember, for being a

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teetotaller. Well, I hated it still, but I was determined to try it. I don't mean to say I got drunk. Thank God, I didn't descend to that. I just got pleasantly blurred. One whisky-and-soda for dinner and one, or sometimes two, glasses of port afterwards were quite enough, I found, to produce the effect. It didn't make me happy, but it deadened the pain. I was happy in the sense that I had almost ceased to be unhappy. I seemed somehow to float, in the ocean of my unhappiness, on a small, fragile raft of mental and physical ease. It was as if the alcohol had thawed something in me, broken down the ice barriers that penned me in. Then I got to like the stuff, especially the port, and one morning when I was feeling particularly low – feeling that need, which obsesses lonely people, for some touch of colour, some small excitation of the senses – I went to the dining-room cupboard and got out the decanter. There was no glass, so I used a cup which happened to be there. I hadn't the face to ask Mrs. Parker for a wine-glass. After that, I used from time to time to feel an absolute craving for a glass of port in the middle of the morning, and one morning, as I was pouring it out, Mrs. Parker came into the dining-room and, to my shame, caught me at it. I hadn't heard a sound, and I nearly jumped out of my senses.

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‘You’re laughing, Oliver! Well, I admit a glass of port in the morning is not a very deadly sin, nor, indeed, were my mild indulgences in the evening. No, I’m not disgusted with myself merely because I took to drinking port and whisky. On the contrary, if I led a happy, sociable life I should probably drink more than I do. It’s my motive that disgusts me. If I drank them simply because I liked them, I shouldn’t mind: but surely it is rather disgusting that I should have to drug myself for a part of each day simply to enable myself to face the life I live. For that, after all, is what it amounts to. An anodyne, a drug, an anæsthetic – that’s what I take alcohol for, because I feel so wretched in the evenings.

‘One evening, during one of my long reveries, I found myself imagining that I was married. I was picturing as my wife the little maid who used to wait on me in my lodgings in London. She was a charming little thing with a round, rosy face, dark, alert eyes, and a most refreshing smile. I fell in love with her and used to venture – imagine it, Oliver! – to talk to her sometimes when she was clearing the table. I needn’t tell you what we talked about – the weather, the landlady’s rheumatics, and other austere themes: and all the time, my timid, inarticulate senses and her bright eyes and smile were doing their best to talk of things

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entirely different. Her name was Rose. Rose what? I never knew the other name. Sometimes, when I heard her tidying my bedroom, I used to go in, as if by accident, and get a handkerchief, just to have the pleasure of seeing her; and, before going in, I would prepare something jovial and natural to say, which, when the moment came, I never succeeded in saying. But there is one incident – if you can call it an incident – which I especially remember. I was sitting in the arm-chair in my sitting-room with my legs stretched out and my feet in the fender and she came in with a scuttle of coal. She knelt down on the hearthrug, almost touching my legs, and began to put coal on the fire and sweep up the hearth. In that position she was in front of me and with her back to me. Her neat, compact little body, her hair, her white neck and the rosy curve of one cheek were there for me to inspect unobserved. But, even though there was no one to see me, I was half ashamed to look. Then suddenly I had a violent impulse to throw my arms round her, and rest my chin on her shoulder with my cheek against hers. Oh, of course, I didn't do it. I needn't tell you that. I just sat still, and soon she got up and went out. An exciting story, isn't it? A few months later she left and I saw no more of her. Well, it was Rose that I pictured as my wife

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in that day-dream of mine. I pictured her just as I had known her, in her servant's print-dress; and the house — this austere, bachelor establishment — was noisy with children. They shouted upstairs, banged doors, or burst into the room bringing some absurd childish question to be solved. How delightful it would be, I thought to myself, to live in a cheerful, noisy house like that! And then it occurred to me that I might make friends with the choir-boys, ask them to tea on Sundays, tame them, so to speak, till they lost their awe of me and would run about the house and bang my doors and treat me . . . well, at least as an uncle. So I began the very next day, and week by week I had them to tea and tried to get to know them.

'But I soon found it was no good. I didn't know how to behave to children: I couldn't think what to say to them. Good Lord! I felt just as shy with them as I did with grown-up people. My official, schoolmaster manner which I always turned on at choir-practices was, I found, the only one I had. I had no idea how to set about getting some sort of merriment going. I had imagined that it would start of its own accord, by spontaneous combustion, I suppose. But not so, and soon I found myself talking heavy shop about choir-practices and anthems and oratorios, and the boys, of course, faced by a cold, grim schoolmaster,

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were as shy and reserved as I was. Sometimes I would listen detachedly and critically to my lamentable attempts at conversation, and my voice, the very words and phrases I used, sounded stilted, devitalized, frozen. How I hated and despised myself! Then, when it was time for them to go, I used to watch them walking, prim and silent, down the garden path, and always, when they had shut the gate behind them, I heard them suddenly break out into chatter and laughter, just as if by shutting me away they had regained their own natural selves. No, it was no good. They froze me and I froze them. I shall never forget the day when I finally gave up trying. Two of them were here. We had finished tea. Mrs. Parker had cleared the table and had just gone out carrying a tray, and one of the boys was shutting the door after her. The other stood somewhere near that table, and I had gone over to the mantelpiece there to get some photograph to show them. The photograph was propped against the mirror and as I put out my hand towards it, something moving in the mirror caught my eye and I glanced into it. The first thing I saw was the boy by the door. He had just shut it: his hand was still on the door-knob, and his face and body were half turned away from it. He was staring at the other boy and his face was screwed into a grin. Without

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moving my head I glanced at the other – at his reflection, that is – and was just in time to catch him dancing with his fingers to his nose at me behind my back. It was all over in a flash. I left the photograph where it was and turned round. There they both stood as solemn as judges. You'll think me a fool, no doubt, to take the thing so seriously, but after all, Oliver, it does imply so much, such a complete duplicity, such callousness towards the friendship I was trying – lamely enough, I admit – to show them. Never have I felt so deeply wounded. For a moment I was on the point of bursting out and accusing them to their faces; but only for a moment. As usual, my courage failed me; and perhaps it was just as well it did, for I should have created an unbearable situation for the three of us. And yet, might it not have been better to have had the thing out there and then, to have treated it as a monstrous joke and so, once for all, broken through the ice? But no! At the moment it would have been impossible. My feelings were too acute for that, but at least I controlled myself sufficiently to pretend that I had seen nothing, and quickly enough too to make the boys believe it. After that I gave up hope of surrounding myself with a happy family and retired again into my vacuum.

'But tell me candidly, Oliver: can you stand

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any more of this? Honestly? I may go on? You're doing me an immense kindness by listening. I seem, by talking of these things, to escape from them somehow. It is as if I actually, as well as figuratively, got them off my mind.

‘Well, a few months ago came a supreme opportunity for escape—escape, I mean, from my vacuum, from my own selfish self. Yes, selfish! for in the course of all this introspection I came finally to see through myself to that extent. I am really simply a parasite. I rely entirely on others: not at all on myself. I sit waiting humbly and timidly, like a Victorian maiden at a ball. I make no movement, no effort, but forlornly expect others to do all the work of human intercourse and friendship. I wait for people to come to me, pity me, offer me their friendship, give me what I so much need without myself giving anything at all. Indeed, in my self-abasement I believe (I *still* incurably believe) that I have nothing to give that is worth anybody's acceptance. And if by chance, with so little encouragement, people do come, I cling to them desperately and jealously, resolved to have them all to myself. If they allowed me, I would, I suppose, smother them, suck the life out of them. Fortunately for them, they take fright, *run* instinctively, even though they do not exactly know why.

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‘Well, as I was saying, my great opportunity came some months ago, and though as usual I made a fool of myself and did my best to ruin my chances it was, in the end, the irony of fate, and not myself this time, that wrecked the thing. It was just after the afternoon service and I was getting to the end of the voluntary when I heard steps on the stair of the organ-loft. I took it for granted it was a choir-boy. One or other of them often come up after the service to bring back a music-book or ask some question about the next choir-practice. So I did not look to see who it was till, when I had finished the piece and was pushing in the stops, I suddenly caught sight of a lady – a young woman somewhere in her twenties – standing at the top of the stairs looking at me, half amused, half embarrassed. I tried to apologize for ignoring her as I had done, and in half a minute, of course, I was twice as embarrassed as she was. That seemed to reassure her and she began to explain how it was that she had dared to beard me in my den. She was staying with her aunt, some miles away, and had walked in on purpose to come to the service because she was very keen on music, especially on old English music – Byrd, Taverner, and the rest, and, as you know, we do a lot of that here. She had hoped, she said, that there might have been some of it

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that afternoon, but both the anthem and my voluntaries had been Bach. "And so," I said — she was such a charming girl that I was already beginning to feel quite self-possessed — "and so you would like to hear some now?" She blushed and smiled. I simply can't describe, Oliver, the . . . the extraordinary . . . however, let it pass . . . she smiled, and replied that if I didn't mind, if it really wasn't asking too much, and so on. "Oh, I'm always ready," I told her, "to play these old people," and I began to get out the music-books.

'I played her all sorts of things, and after each I paused on purpose to have the pleasure of watching her face as she began to be afraid that I was going to stop, and to see her hoping, yet afraid to ask, that I would go on. Those intervals began to create out of the shyness of us both a delightful sort of half-humorous intimacy. I must have played to her for at least an hour. When at last I stopped there was one of those unexpected moments of awkwardness, which she cut short by holding out her hand and bidding me good-bye. It was quite a shock to find that everything was actually over and she was going. As usual in such an emergency, I was helpless. I wished her good-bye and, with a sudden sinking of the heart, heard her trotting down the loft-stair and then across the transept. But fate was on my side for

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once; for when I had closed up the organ and got to the foot of the stair I saw her hurrying back towards me. "I'm afraid we're locked in," she said. I had quite forgotten that by the time I had finished playing the doors would be locked. Not that it mattered, because I have a private key which fits the small door in the north transept. I took it from my pocket and held it up, smiling. I felt suddenly immensely relieved. Owing to that providential accident she had not, after all, escaped me, and as we made our way to the door I was nerving myself to take an incredibly bold step. The certainty that if I did not, I should in a minute have lost her again overcame my shyness and, as I fumbled with the lock, I blurted out almost surlily: "Won't you come and have some tea with me?" And, to cover my nervousness, I went on to explain that this was my house, only a few yards away. She looked up at me, blushing; but not, I felt, from embarrassment but from pleasure. "Oh, thank you," she said. "I shall be very glad to." She had a fresh, ingenuous way of speaking that made the most commonplace phrase charming.

'Our tea together was a great success: we got along extraordinarily well. My usual self-consciousness seemed to thaw in her company and all the time we chattered I kept watching her,

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fascinated as one is fascinated by some graceful little animal. It was not till after she had gone that I realized that I knew neither her name nor address. But at the moment I was feeling so happy that this didn't seem to matter. I walked about my room, unable to sit still. I was trembling, my face was flushed, my teeth chattering. I felt myself tingling, strung up, but not, as in my morbid moods, to a state of painful hypersensitivity: this time it was simply from excess of well-being, from the thrilling experience of just letting myself go.

'Next morning I awoke feeling a little ashamed of all this excitement over what would be, for most people, such an ordinary experience. But that didn't last long. Soon I had dropped back into yesterday's state of exalted happiness. The fact that she had escaped from me, that I had no means of tracing her, did not trouble me even now. I felt confident that we would meet again, and it was not till a day or two later, when my reason began to reassert itself, that I began to realize that, in cold reality, my delightful experience was over, that there was very little chance of my seeing her again. But instinct, it turned out, was surer than reason. That evening I received a letter from her. Her aunt, she wrote, would be so pleased if I would walk over after the afternoon service next

day and stay, perhaps, to dinner, if I didn't consider five miles too much of an undertaking. If I came on foot, she added, she and her cousins would walk half-way to meet me. I read her note over and over again, pondering it, analysing it for all the world as though it were a difficult and obscure document of immense significance. Had her aunt really suggested it, or had she begged her aunt to be allowed to invite me? Or did she write that her aunt would be pleased because the warmth of her own feelings made her shy of expressing them? But if she felt towards me anything of what I felt towards her, why didn't she come to meet me alone instead of bringing those cousins? And what *were* the cousins? Men or women? Boys or girls? I felt suddenly an intense hatred for them, whatever they were. And the aunt? And, no doubt, an uncle. How could I meet her in the presence of this great crowd? I was afraid of them – afraid and acutely jealous. All my old fears and obsessions were swarming round me again, and now more relentlessly than ever. But I was resolved to control myself this time, and with a sick heart and a horrible sense of disillusionment I wrote saying that I would certainly go and that I would walk. As soon as I had written the note I hurried out and posted it, because I knew that, if I delayed, my cowardice would get the better of

me. And for the rest of that day and all next morning I kept the thought of my engagement resolutely out of my mind. That, I knew, was the only way of preserving my courage. To allow my mind to get to work on it would, I knew by bitter experience, be fatal. I told Mrs. Parker that I should be out for supper and in a cold, hard, almost angry mood, which destroyed all my delight at the prospect of seeing her again, I set out, directly the afternoon service was over, to walk the five miles.

‘That, Oliver, was the most abject of all my many failures. Though I compelled myself to keep my thoughts from looking ahead, though I fixed my attention on outward things – the hedges, trees, and birds – I could feel an agony of nervousness growing up in me like a disease. Then suddenly, as I was getting near to the point where she and her cousins would probably meet me, I knew I could go no farther. I hated them: I even hated her, or if not hated, I felt at least a great indefinable grievance against her. Really, I told myself, I didn’t want to see her at all. There was no struggle, no conflict. My resolution just collapsed on itself like a house of cards and I turned round and went back the way I had come, without looking behind me. Think of it, Oliver; What a contemptible worm! What an everlastingly

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damned fool! At that moment I touched the lowest point of my self-contempt.

‘I didn’t return home: I couldn’t. I was broken, flayed alive, and I longed for the refuge of my own room; but the thought of facing Mrs. Parker, her surprise at my unexpected return, her determination to prepare supper for me, however much I assured her I didn’t want any – all these things were complications which, in the state I was in, I couldn’t have borne. So I turned into a lane just before I reached the outskirts of the town and, climbing over a railing, lay down in some grass in the corner of a field. I don’t know how long I lay there, but when I opened my eyes and found it was quite dark, I walked home and went to bed, utterly exhausted.

‘Next morning I awoke grimly determined to put an end, once for all, to this insane self-torment. All my feelings, all my emotions, had burnt themselves out and with them my nervousness. I was self-possessed and quite cold. I determined that I would ask the Precentor to take my place at the morning service and would walk over to see her immediately after breakfast. In the mood I was in, I could face anything. It was, I knew, a highly abnormal mood, for I no longer felt any desire to see her. My feelings for her were, for the time, burnt out with my other emotions. But so much

the better. I should be less likely to make a fool of myself: and, afterwards, what an infinite consolation it would be to have repaired the whole miserable disaster — not, after all, to have sacrificed her to my abject cowardice! But when I got down to breakfast there was a letter for me. How well, already, I knew the writing. It had been written, of course, on the previous evening. She was so sorry, she wrote, that I had been prevented from coming, and the more so as she was leaving next day by the morning train and would miss seeing me again. Next day meant, of course, that very morning. The train she referred to must be the ten o'clock — she would hardly have started as early as the eight-fifteen — and I decided at once that I would go to the station and see her at the train. Though there was still a whole hour before I need start, I hurried over my breakfast and, utterly unable to sit still and wait, went out and wandered about the town. When at last the time drew near and I began to make for the station, the stern, dispassionate mood which had possessed me ever since I woke began to dissolve and I felt a great happiness at the thought that I was on the point of seeing her again. It was as if someone dead whom I had loved had come to life again. I felt quite sure of myself now. At last I had really freed myself from the long disease which had

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always hampered my life: at last I was boldly and deliberately following my desire. For she, I knew beyond question, was nothing more or less than my salvation: she was the only person in the world who could help me to transform myself, to put off the old man and put on the new. I was no longer sitting passively waiting for help. I was forgetting myself, going out of myself, to give myself up to her. I had triumphed over my life-long weakness and it was through her alone that I had been able to do so. That walk to the station was, in the most real sense, the summit of my life.

‘I reached the station half an hour before train-time. The train was already in – the ten train, you know, starts from here – and I paced up and down the platform in a fever of anticipation. By degrees people began to take their places. Time passed, and when, after a quarter of an hour, she had not yet come, I began to be horribly afraid that we would have no time to talk – that I would not have the chance of saying all I was determined to say to her. I bought some illustrated papers for her and then continued my pacing. By now I was unbearably excited. My legs trembled: I had to make a conscious effort to walk properly. Then, five minutes before the train started, the awful certainty came upon me that she would not come. And even

if she did, now, there would be no time even for a word. Three minutes; two minutes; it was useless to hope any longer. I went over to the bookstall, so that, if she came, I should be out of her way. The whistle sounded and I stood watching the train glide out of the station.

'Yes, that was the end of it. Obviously, you see, Oliver, I am doomed to failure even when I succeed in conquering my weaknesses. Write? No, I didn't write. Yes, I suppose I might have done so, but I had no heart for anything. I simply resigned myself, after that. The final frustration of my supreme attempt broke me: my energy, my small store of courage, was exhausted. And yet I am sure, Oliver — absolutely certain — that if only she *had* been there, if only she had not gone by the early train, I should have carried the thing through. There would have been no shirking, that time. I had, you see, determined to tell her there and then that I was in love with her, to ask her to marry me. Yes, of course, it would have been absurdly sudden, but I really believe she liked me. We *did* get on so extraordinarily well — so well that I feel almost certain there was something on her side, too. It would have been unaccountable otherwise. Now? Oh, no: it's too late now, in any case. All this, you see, happened eight months ago. Well, you're the only soul I've told about it, and

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pouring it out like this has been — Heaven knows why — a wonderful consolation to me. And as for you, Oliver, you've been a perfect Job for patience. You won't stay for the service and come back here for tea? Well, anyhow, don't for Heaven's sake let my garrulousness put you off coming to lunch if ever you're in this part of the world again.'

AUNT HETTY

HAVING MURDERED HIS AUNT HETTY, ROLAND Mason (as he flattered himself) had disposed of her pretty completely. Being a surgeon by profession, he had not found it difficult or objectionable to dissect an old lady and, though the disposal of the resulting sections had been less easy, a little ingenuity – and ingenuity had always been his strong point – had scattered her beyond the possibility of reassembly. With a rather touching sense of poetic justice he had buried her heart in the garden – her heart had always been in the garden – and certain other fragments of her he had fed to the two dogs, Toto and Zulu, for had she not always, despite his earnest entreaties, insisted on feeding the dogs during meals, leaving horrible grease-marks on his precious Amritzar rug!

And what a relief it was, when the whole thing was satisfactorily completed, to rest in the security that her visits were at last definitely at an end! For years she had tormented not only him, but also his brother in Sussex, his two sisters – Ann and her husband lived at Southend: Emily and hers near Berkhamstead – and the entire circle of his male and female cousins. She had had no home of her own: it had been, she found, so much easier

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to stay in rotation with her nephews and nieces. And month by month, by dint of doing almost nothing but sitting in a chair knitting and occasionally dropping a word or two, she had steadily and relentlessly undermined the well-being of each family she visited. Ann, Roland Mason's sister, and her husband, after years of happy married life, were at the point of divorce: Flora, his sister Emily's daughter, a charming girl of seventeen, had run away with a bus-conductor rather than stay another day in a home grown hateful to her: Lucy, his brother's cheerful and vigorous wife, had succumbed to an obscure nervous disorder which kept her for a whole month at a time in a nursing-home. The very parrots bit the hands that fed them and the perches that supported them: the dogs and cats threw off the domestication of centuries and relapsed into the discreditable barbarity of the jungle. And at the end of every month Aunt Hetty rolled up her knitting, packed her trunk, and moved on to the next niece or nephew, spreading consternation before her, leaving desolation behind. They could not very well, she believed, refuse her, for, as she had announced years ago, she had willed her fortune equally between them, and (even when divided among nine) it was worth having. Her mistake had been to rely too much on the economic appeal, to ignore the

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possibility that the purchasing power of her money must have, eventually, its limit.

It was with her nephew Roland that the limit had first been reached. He had determined that, when next she offered herself, he would refuse, and had announced as much to the rest of the family. To his surprise the family had not supported him. On the contrary, they had turned upon him in fury. Aunt Hetty, they pointed out, would merely stay the longer with the rest of them: he was a shirker, a renegade, a family traitor; and as for following his example, he discovered, by their curious reticence on the subject, that, in point of fact, they lacked the courage to do so. It was not Aunt Hetty's money: its influence had been exhausted long ago. By this time they would have considered her absence cheaply purchased by their share of her fortune. It was simply the terrible moral ascendancy she had gained over them. They dared not refuse her, and Roland, by their united disapproval, had been compelled to give in.

But something, he was determined, must be done; and sitting, three weeks later, broken and exhausted in his garden after Aunt Hetty had gone early to bed on the first day of her visit, he had as it were inhaled out of the quiet and coolness of the perfect June evening the happy idea of

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murder. The more he considered the idea, the more it attracted him. It was not mere selfishness: he would be benefiting not only himself but the whole of his family. Morally, too, it was amply justified — one of those special cases, those exceptions that prove the rule. Unhappily the law does not countenance the exception, and even individual opinion, he realized, might in such an instance prove obdurate. Humanity, cowed by tradition and long convention, is inclined to set a taboo on certain types of action, be they never so justified; and so, people being what they are, he must, he told himself, keep the thing strictly secret.

Yet, in the case of Aunt Hetty, could anything whatever be said *against* murder? Roland considered the thing conscientiously and impartially from every side. Honestly, he could not attach to himself the smallest blame.

And how blameless he had been, the outcome abundantly proved. The nine households whose unity and happiness had been gradually destroyed by the old lady's venomous influence, grew calm, peaceable, and happy once again. Ann and her husband forgot even the subject of their disagreement; Flora abandoned her bus-conductor and returned to her family, who received her with tears of joy; Lucy, as if by magic, became cheerful and

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vigorous again. The very cats, dogs, and parrots lowered their bristles and feathers and lay down together in amity. 'And all so simple!' said Roland to himself. 'No pain! No complications! The simplest and the most successful operation of my career!' And as in the course of the ensuing year he visited the pacified homes of his relations, he had more and more reason to congratulate himself on his strength of mind.

At first, of course, they were inclined to disguise their feelings about Aunt Hetty's curious disappearance, referring to her always with an upward cast of the eyes as 'Poor Aunt Hetty!' But as time went on, they would admit in confidential and expansive moments that really . . . after all . . . it would be hypocrisy to deny . . . almost, in fact, providential. And Roland Mason, his face shining with affectionate pleasure, would with difficulty refrain from answering: 'Not at all, old chap. Please don't mention it.'

Unhappily, on the occasion of a great family reunion, it was he himself who mentioned it, casually, modestly, over a bottle of '87 port. It was one of those occasions when family affection loosens the bonds of conventionality, when the heart expands and every reticence seems a crime, and the thing popped out in the frankest, most natural way in the world: 'As a matter of fact,

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though I ses it as shouldn't, it's me you've got to thank.'

'To thank?' They were puzzled. They raised their eyebrows.

'Yes, for that little matter of Aunt Hetty; because, between ourselves . . .' and in his own inimitable after-dinner manner — for he was, poor fellow, an admirable raconteur — he told, with a hundred picturesque details, the little story of Aunt Hetty's disappearance. In doing so — as he himself was forced to admit when, a few days later, he stepped into the prison van — he made just that type of mistake that Aunt Hetty had made when she placed too strong a reliance on the economic appeal.

A ROMANTIC TEMPERAMENT

NICOLL PACED THE PLATFORM. HE HAD RETAINED two places in a first-class carriage by means of his coat and suitcase. People carrying bags and newspapers, porters pushing trucks of luggage, kept streaming past him up the platform. In ten minutes the train would start, yet still no Pauline! It was just like her, Nicoll thought to himself with irritation: no sense of time, no order, no poise. She would arrive, he knew, excited and bewildered at the last moment with some idiotic excuse for her lateness, and there would be one of those moments of breathless panic which he hated so. Fortunately there were still plenty of empty carriages left.

He felt curiously cold for one on the brink of an adventure: but, after all, the adventure was hers, not his. He sighed wearily. What a nuisance these women were! Why was it that they would keep falling in love with him? He was not a bit good-looking, he knew that; yet there was something about him, apparently, which attracted women, and always, unfortunately, the type of woman that he himself did not much care for. This Pauline, for instance — Mrs. Forrest — had been a perfect plague. For months she had actually been worrying him to go away with her for

a week-end. At last, a few days ago, he had wearily acquiesced. 'Well, if you insist!' he had said.

And she had replied with one of those aggrieved Sassoferrato glances which always annoyed him: 'You don't seem particularly eager!'

'I'm not!' he had replied; but, feeling next moment that he had been too brutal, he smiled to mitigate the words, and immediately she had forgotten them and was chattering away as usual.

'And what will Edward think of all this?' Nicoll enquired as she poured out an amazing variety of schemes.

For a moment a shadow crossed her face: but soon all was serene again. 'I shall tell him, of course,' she said, 'that I am going to Kitty.'

'Of course!' But Pauline did not notice the ironical tone of his answer. A feeling of weariness came over him: he had argued about Edward and Edward's rights so often. Latterly he had given Edward up: after all, it was Edward's job, not his, to look after his own wife. Whenever things reached a certain point of complexity Nicoll invariably gave in: it was generally the simplest thing to do. That was why he had given in to Pauline about this week-end at Margate.

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And yet, to be honest with himself, had it been no more than weary acquiescence? After all, he was a man, and if quite an attractive little woman persisted in throwing herself at his head . . . well! But at least he had never for an instant deceived her about his attitude towards the affair. The trouble was that, despite his frankness, Pauline was determined to deceive herself. In this she showed an amazing ingenuity. Facts, for her, were nothing more than so much plastic material to be moulded by her into the romantic fictions of her imagination, fictions in which she was always the ingenuous but irresistible heroine and he the ardent lover seeking to lure her from her home.

A few hours after their talk he had received a long, excited letter from her. She half feared, he could see, that he might repent of his promise and she was resolved to prevent that. 'If you fail me, Arthur,' she threatened, 'I believe I shall do something desperate.' There followed a long tangle of instructions, for Pauline, when occasion demanded, could be fiercely practical. The actual arrangements, he read without surprise, were to be made by him. He was to wire to an hotel at Margate for rooms and find out about the train – a train about midday when Edward would be safe in his office – and, when all was settled, he was to

let her know. Well, he had done so, and she had wired in reply that she would meet him on the platform a quarter of an hour before train-time. Nicoll glanced at the station clock: the quarter of an hour had now shrunk to two minutes. In two minutes the train would start: an inspector was snipping tickets. Obviously Pauline was not coming. Well, all the better! Naturally, when things had gone so far, he was a little disappointed: but, in the long run, what a saving of trouble! He turned to rescue his coat and bag from the carriage and at the same moment saw her head bobbing along among the hurrying crowd. On she came, fluttering, anxious, small and neat as a Jenny-wren. Angry, amused, and somehow melted, he ran to meet her and took her bag. 'As usual!' he scolded, and they bundled into a carriage as the train was starting.

'But, my dear,' Pauline explained, leaning back and fanning herself with a tiny lace handkerchief, 'I've had the most frightful rush. You see, I had all the meals to order.'

'The meals?'

'Yes, Edward's meals, while we are away.'

'Thoughtful creature! But couldn't Edward's meals have been ordered yesterday?'

Pauline looked at him and her eyes began to assume the Sassoferrato expression. 'Yesterday,

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Arthur?' she reproached him. 'Do you imagine I was in a state to attend to anything yesterday?'

'Why not?'

'Why? Well, your letter, Arthur . . . ! I was so upset, so bewildered . . . !' She covered her face with two small champagne-suède hands. Nicoll watched her, the corners of his mouth twitching with amusement. She dropped her hands and gazed at him with eyes full of tragic seriousness. Nicoll laughed outright.

'What are you laughing at?' she asked, furious that her carefully selected mood was not being taken seriously.

'Can't you guess?'

'No, I'm afraid I can't.' There was a pained haughtiness in her reply.

Nicoll felt the usual irritation breaking through his amusement. 'Come now, Pauline!' he said. 'Why must you keep up this everlasting pretence? There was nothing disturbing for you in my letter which was, as you perfectly well remember, a reply to an extremely dictatorial one from you instructing me when and whither I was to bolt with you. Shall I read you yours?' He put his hand to his breast-pocket.

'Please! *Please*, Arthur!'

'What? You're ashamed of it? I only wanted

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to read it to remind you of the real facts. You will persist, you see, in . . . how shall I put it? . . . in adapting the facts. You are determined that I shall be the wicked seducer and you the innocent little wife. Well, I don't like the part you have cast me for, and so I want once more to recall to your memory the actual facts, which are that I have at last consented, after seven months of unremitting persecution . . . !'

'Arthur! Arthur, *please!* You make me out absolutely shameless!'

'So you are, my dear. Shameless and indefatigable! I have documentary evidence.' He patted his breast-pocket.

'I wonder,' she remarked, as though it were an interesting philosophical point, 'what you would say if I were to get out at the next station and go home?'

'I should probably say, "What a waste of money!"'

'Money?'

'Our tickets! They cost over thirty shillings each.'

She heaved a disillusioned little sigh. 'And that's all!'

'No. I should probably also say, "What a waste of time!"'

'You're hateful, Arthur!'

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'Then why badger me so persistently to go away with you?'

She snuggled up against him like a bird warmed by sunshine. 'You do treat me barbarously!' she cooed.

'How else should I treat you, my dear child? You *are* a barbarian. Most women are. Creatures of impulse, entirely without principle in the pursuit of their desires!' He laid an arm round her shoulders and shook her gently. 'You ought to be in the Zoo: then only would the world be safe for us men!'

She turned her face up to his. 'How much do you love me?'

'Love you? Not a bit. I've always told you so, my dear. That I am your passionate adorer is only, you must bear in mind, a part of your ingenious fiction.'

She shook off his arm and moved away from him. For a minute she sat thoughtful and impassive. He knew exactly what was happening. She was making up her mind whether to be offended or not.

'Is it worth the trouble?' he asked.

She turned to him loftily, as if disturbed in a profound meditation.

'What?' she raised puzzled eyebrows.

'You know well enough what I said and what I meant by it.'

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Pauline snorted. 'You simply don't know how to treat a lady, I'm afraid.'

'Don't you mean rather that I understand rather too uncomfortably well how to treat a certain lady?'

Pauline broke into one of her unexpected ripples of laughter. 'Yes, I do, you detestable wretch!'

At that moment an attendant passed down the corridor announcing lunch, and Pauline, all agog for a new excitement, sprang up and executed a rapid titivation before the mirror.

'Am I all right?' she asked, turning to Nicoll for inspection.

'I see no change,' he replied, 'but you were all right before.'

In the dining-car she was like a child on a holiday. 'What fun!' she chuckled rapturously. 'And how frightfully fast we're going! Do time it, Arthur, and see what the speed is. It must be at least seventy miles an hour. I'll look out for the mile-posts.'

But next moment she was helping herself to sardines and had forgotten all about mile-posts. 'Poor Edward!' she sighed. 'My heart almost failed me, Arthur, as I said good-bye to him this morning. He seemed, somehow, as if he couldn't let me go. He offered to leave the office early and

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come and see me off at the station, but I wouldn't hear of that.'

'Naturally not!' But cynicism was lost on Pauline. She was talking, not listening – the one, with Pauline, often excluded the other – and, besides, she had already passed on from the incident of Edward and was imploring Nicoll to look at the extraordinary old man at the table opposite. 'Not now!' she whispered. 'Don't look now, because he's watching. Wait till I tell you!' and she went through an elaborate representation of innocence to prove to the old gentleman that she had not been talking about him.

In less than two hours they had reached their destination. The gay seaside town was flooded with sunshine. A delicious salt breeze blew up from the sea: everywhere there were gaily-dressed people, flags streaming, ribbons and skirts fluttering, Pekingese dogs with ears blown back straining at their leashes, and on the sea-front the few deck-chairs that were unoccupied flapped inside out and back again. Somewhere a band was playing.

As soon as they arrived at their hotel Pauline went upstairs to put on a new hat: but in less than five minutes she came running back into the lounge and dropped into the chair beside Nicoll. Something had happened: Nicoll could not at first

make out what, for Pauline was almost inarticulate. 'To think of it!' she declared with hands clasped and voice on the brink of tears. 'To think of it!'

'But it's impossible to think of it, dear,' objected Nicoll, 'unless you explain.'

'Oh, it's unbelievable,' she wailed, 'and he seemed so upset this morning!'

'Upset, Pauline? But whom are you speaking of?'

'Edward. I've seen Edward.'

'Edward? Here?' Nicoll leapt from his chair, seriously alarmed.

'Yes. We went up in the lift together.'

'Good God! Then he saw you?'

'Not at first; but I took good care that he did before we got to the top.'

Nicoll opened his hands in bewilderment. 'Do explain, Pauline. Do you mean to say you actually thrust yourself on his notice?'

'Yes, I should think I did.' She paused. 'You see, he was . . . he was . . .' — she almost broke down — 'he was with some *girl*!' She spoke the word *girl* as though it were the most disgraceful in the language.

'Girl?' echoed Nicoll, and then burst into smothered laughter. 'Well, upon my word!' he roared discreetly. 'Good old Edward!'

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'Good old Edward?' Pauline turned on him almost hissing with indignation. 'What do you mean, please? I fail to see that there is anything to be amused at.'

'Do you, Pauline? Honestly?'

Her only reply was to stare at him coldly.

'You see no rather disturbing parallel between . . . ?'

Pauline looked him in the eye steadily and honestly. 'None whatever!' she replied. Then her lip trembled and she fumbled feverishly in her little bead bag for a handkerchief. 'I should never have believed it of him!' she sobbed with such genuine grief that Nicoll was profoundly touched. He took her hand in his, stroking and patting it.

'There! There!' he soothed her, and then, after a moment, he asked: 'And what do you propose to do about it?'

At once her grief had vanished and she was all angry animation. 'Do?' she said. 'I'm going straight to their room, of course, to have it out with him. I know the number: I heard him give it to the lift-boy.' She rose from her chair and marched off indignantly to carry out her righteous purpose.

Nicoll's eyes followed her in amazement. Next moment she was gone and he found himself alone, forgotten. Then he too rose from his chair and

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soon, after a brief conversation in the manager's office, he was driving with his coat and suitcase towards the station. A train was starting for Victoria in ten minutes, and as he took his seat in it and lit a cigarette he murmured to himself with great conviction: 'An astounding woman!'

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‘**R**EALLY NOT ANOTHER CUP?’ MADELINE LIFTED the silver teapot, glancing towards fat Mrs. Muncaster who sat, a great complicated bundle of furs and silks, on her left.

‘No, my dear. I should love another, but I really mustn’t.’

Madeline set down the teapot, raising her eyebrows in hypocritical reproach. The moment of Mrs. Muncaster’s departure seemed, by her refusal, to be brought perceptibly nearer. There was hope now that she would be gone before five o’clock when Basil had promised to look in. But next moment that hope receded suddenly, for Mrs. Muncaster leaned back in her chair and put her head on one side.

‘I shall not be happy, my dear,’ she said, ‘until you are married.’

‘Married?’ Madeline received the suggestion with surprise. ‘But why should I marry?’

‘Why should you *not*? That’s what I want to know. You’re everything that a wife ought to be and you’re beautiful into the bargain. And the years are slipping by, you know, Madeline: you ought not to postpone it much longer. Thirty-three is it? or thirty-four?’

‘Still,’ persisted Madeline, ‘why marry if one

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doesn't want to? *I*, for example, don't want to.' *Liar*, she said to herself, *liar*; and Mrs. Muncaster, too, reproached her:

'But you *must* want to. Every woman wants to. It's natural to want to settle down and make a home for oneself; and a home, my dear, includes a husband.'

Madeline smiled but made no reply. Her impatience was becoming more and more acute. What a disaster that Mrs. Muncaster should have called on the very afternoon that Basil was coming, and *this* afternoon of all. Perhaps if she were to let the conversation flag, Mrs. Muncaster would go; and so she sat, gazing into the fire, listening to the clock ticking on the mantelpiece and silently urging Mrs. Muncaster. 'Go. Go. Get up. You want to get up and go *now*!' Surely she could drive in the idea of departure if she let her mind concentrate hard enough on the old woman. She raised her eyes to the clock. In a quarter of an hour he would arrive: he was always punctual to the second; and if, when he arrived, he found Mrs. Muncaster here, he would probably make himself extravagantly pleasant to her for ten minutes and then suddenly and unexpectedly depart. 'A surfeit of Mother Muncaster comes over one so suddenly!' he had once said to Madeline. Madeline had laughed. 'But, after all,' she had replied, 'she's a

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kind old thing.' 'Oh, a good sort, I admit. And kind, certainly: too kind. One flees, in the end, to avoid suffocation by kindness – to rescue the shreds of one's individuality.'

It was true, perfectly true, Madeline thought now as she sat staring at the fire. The kindness of the polar-bear. She groaned inwardly. 'Oh, go, woman: for God's sake, go!'

But Mrs. Muncaster was smiling protectively. 'Well, I am doing my best for you: you may be sure of that.'

Madeline emerged from her reverie. 'Your best for me?'

'To get you married.'

Madeline felt suddenly afraid. Had this meddling old woman actually been talking to men about her? So far from helping things she might very easily ruin everything for her by sheer clumsy importunity.

Mrs. Muncaster pursed her lips and nodded her head. 'Yes, my dear. I've even chosen the man.'

A terrible apprehension chilled Madeline to the heart: it was all she could do to assume a smile of indifference.

'And who is he, if I may ask?'

Mrs. Muncaster shook a finger. 'Ah, that's my business!'

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Beneath the surface Madeline was furiously angry. She longed to seize the old thing and smother her in her own furs. If Mrs. Muncaster had been suggesting things to men, the men would very likely conclude that it was by Madeline's own wish — a feminine conspiracy. The old woman would simply be making a fool of her. Except for that, her intrusive benevolence did not matter; *unless* . . . Madeline suddenly went cold all over . . . unless she had been attacking Basil on the subject. Under a calm and gaily cynical exterior Basil would be horrified. His independence, his extreme sensitiveness, would leap away from anything — from Mozart, from Blake, from all he most loved — if Mrs. Muncaster were to press it upon him. Five minutes to five. 'Get up, old woman. Get up and go away. It's late. You're wanted at home!'

To Madeline's delight Mrs. Muncaster responded. She got up and held out her hand. The magic had worked at last, but only just in time, for it was two minutes to five when she drove away.

Madeline, left alone, stood by the fireplace, one elbow on the mantelpiece. Her heart was fluttering: every nerve was tense with suppressed excitement. And yet, why? After all, the whole thing might be simply her own imagination. She and Basil had been friends for so long: why, now,

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should their relation change? Probably it was she herself who had begun to change and so had read into their last meeting things which, from Basil's point of view, were not there. And yet, surely he *had* been different. It had begun with his arrival: he had held her hand so much longer than usual. 'It's always such a relief to come to see you,' he had said.

'After . . . whom?' she had asked, with a laugh.

'After Mrs. Muncaster and the rest of the crew. They're hopeless. I give them up.'

'All of them?'

'Yes, every Jack one of them. They're all right for a time. Occasionally I actually feel a sort of craving for Mrs. Muncaster: her stupidity, her kindness, her absurd over-estimation of her own importance, are all, in some curious way, lovable. Then, one morning, I wake up with a loathing, a real first-class hatred, for the whole pack of them. If only I were a Borgia I should invite them all to one of those conclusive little suppers.'

'And next day, perhaps, you'd be sorry.'

'No doubt a little sorry. But in the end, really glad. If it wasn't for you, I should have left this place long ago. Really: I mean it.' He had put out his hand as if to lay it on her arm, hesitated, and shyly let it fall again. Surely all this had meant something more than their old friendship?

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Yet *had* it, really? For she, certainly, had lately begun to feel so much more than mere friendship for Basil, and that, undoubtedly, might lead her to misinterpret him, to read through different eyes what was really the same as it had always been. But no: when he had said good-bye he had held her hands in both his own, begging to be allowed to come again soon – sooner than usual. That, surely, was real enough and different enough!

The front-door bell rang, sending her heart to her throat. In a few minutes the problem would be solved one way or the other.

He came in, brisk, cheerful, face and collar as usual miraculously clean, with the same refreshing boyishness which she always discovered anew every time she met him. She held out her hand.

‘You’re just too late for . . . whom do you guess?’

‘I don’t have to guess. I know. Mother Muncaster.’

‘You saw her?’

‘No, I didn’t. But fee-fi-fo-fum, I smell the smell of her detestable eau-de-Cologne. Does she put it on, do you think, because she likes it or because she imagines other people like it?’

Madeline thought. ‘From pure habit, I should think, as she puts on her petticoat. Then you don’t like eau-de-Cologne?’

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'Not since I knew Mother Muncaster.'

Madeline laughed, but there was a weight at her heart, for she knew already – knew by some subtle and infallible sense the moment he entered the room – that her golden expectations were unfounded. Except for a trace of unwonted nervousness, he was the same, exactly the same friendly creature, as he had always been. As for the nervousness, she had felt that, too, at once, and realized that it was not the suppressed excitement of passion, but merely a slight embarrassment . . . how could she define it? . . . the embarrassment of someone reclaiming a debt from a friend. The maid came in with fresh tea and toast.

'I gather,' Madeline remarked as she filled his cup, 'that Mrs. Muncaster is under a cloud.'

Basil nodded. 'She is,' he said. 'A heavy one.'

'Heavier than usual?'

'A pea-soup fog, and one that is likely to be permanent.'

'Dear me, and what has she been up to this time?'

'Oh, nothing special. Just her usual damned kindness in an aggravated form. Plunging in, so to speak, where elephants fear to tread.' Suddenly he became serious. 'She hasn't, by any chance . . .' he hesitated for a moment with his eyes fixed upon hers: 'she hasn't been saying anything about me to you, has she?'

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‘About you? No, nothing.’ Although what she said was perfectly true, Madeline blushed scarlet as she said it.

Basil’s eyes turned away. ‘That’s all right,’ he said briefly. And suddenly Madeline knew that he suspected her of complicity with Mrs. Muncaster. Yes, that was what had happened: Mrs. Muncaster had been pressing her upon Basil and he believed that she had known it and acquiesced. What was she to do? She must undeceive him somehow: for such behaviour would seem to Basil, as it seemed to her, contemptible, a betrayal of their mutual freedom and privacy. And with Mrs. Muncaster, of all people! She raised her eyes to find his fixed on her again.

‘You’re sure?’ he asked.

‘Quite sure.’ She met his gaze without flinching. Still, she could see, he was not satisfied. Why, oh why, wouldn’t he tell her everything! If only he would explain what had happened, she would be able to clear herself convincingly. She watched his face, hoping that he would begin; but he sat silent, staring at the carpet with knitted brows. But not for long. Soon he roused himself and began to chatter in his brisk way of other things. It was horrible: worse, much worse, than if he had broken out and abused her. She tried, but in vain, to chatter back. Her attention was

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absorbed by the pit that gaped between them and she could not disguise her suffering. Her mouth was stiff and drawn: even the sound of her voice was changed. What was she to do? How could she make him believe her? He rose to go, his face still clouded. Despair came over her: if she let him go now, perhaps he would never come back.

Then, as she took his hand, she had an inspiration. It was dangerous and it was a lie, at least one word of it was a lie; but, knowing him as she did, she believed it was the only hope.

‘Now that you’re going,’ she said, ‘I’ll confess that, when you came, I was very much afraid you were going to propose to me.’

His face cleared instantly and next moment his mouth curled into the humorous, boyish smile which, for her, was the expression most typical of him.

‘Bless my soul,’ he said, ‘what next?’ Then, as he turned to go, he glanced back and she knew that she had succeeded. ‘Will you be in next Wednesday,’ he asked, ‘at the usual time?’

STILL WATERS

I

OUR NEIGHBOURS THE GRANTS WERE MOVING. Miss Leppard, an old friend of mine and also of theirs, had arrived on her annual visit on the previous day, and now she and I sat in the drawing-room window watching the slow disembowelling of the house next door.

'That,' I said, as two men carried a black Victorian chiffonier down the garden path, 'that was in the drawing-room, on the left of the fireplace.'

'And these, coming now, must be the dining-room chairs,' remarked Miss Leppard.

'Quite right. And here comes that atrocious marble table that stood on the first landing.'

Piece after piece, disturbed from its resting-place of eight years, was brought out and placed on the grass, shamefully exposed to the outside world, till it could be fitted into the great van that stood at the gate. It was incredible that one van could swallow so much. Both the drawing-room and dining-room must already be almost empty. One seemed to feel through the wall the coldness and dampness of the increasing void. Then a cab drove up and stopped as near to the gate as the van would allow. The cabman dismounted and went into the house and in a moment reappeared

with Annie the housemaid carrying a huge black trunk. When the trunk had been hoisted on to the box Annie returned to the house and soon emerged again with a Gladstone bag; and then the two little Grant girls, poor little things, came out with their Aunt Virginia. They paused to stare in amazement at a large family portrait which had been propped against a table on the grass. Milly, the elder, was pointing at it, and next minute Ida, looking with her thin legs and bushy red hair like a malevolent imp, skipped across the border that edged the path and, licking one finger, rubbed it against the canvas and then earnestly examined it. Then simultaneously they discovered that we were watching them and, laughing guiltily, ran after Aunt Virginia.

'Milly,' said Miss Leppard, 'has a great look of her mother, but Ida is like none of them.'

'No. A funny little creature.'

'A changeling, no doubt,' said Miss Leppard: 'a fairy's child.' We heard the cab-door bang and a moment later they were driving away, leaving the house to its fate.

'So much for that,' I said.

'A sad business,' sighed Miss Leppard.

'And an incredible business, too,' I replied. 'The last person in the world, I should have said . . .'

‘Irene Grant?’

‘Yes. She was, I always felt, one of those people to whom nothing ever has happened or ever will happen: a woman too apathetic, too uncombustible to respond to the spark of outward events. I could never discover that she was particularly happy or particularly unhappy: her invariable mood was . . . how shall I put it? . . . a slightly plaintive tolerance of the unavoidable necessity of living. How extraordinary it is, Miss Leppard, that I should have lived next door to that woman for eight years and yet known her so remarkably little! Of her husband I feel that I know a good deal, and of the two little girls, but of Mrs. Grant . . . nothing.’

‘And isn’t it more extraordinary still,’ said Miss Leppard, ‘that I should have known her ever since she was a child of fourteen and yet know her really no better than you do?’

Yet was there after all, I reflected, anything so very extraordinary about it? Was it not simply that there was nothing to know? And I fell once more to recalling Irene Grant. What survived most definitely was the colourless, extinguished voice and the half-closed eyelids which hardly ever rose to reveal the eyes. Her skin was beautiful, a delicate olive, pallid and mat – very smooth, one fancied, to touch. There was something curi-

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ously attractive, too, in the glossy black hair, especially where it thinned away on the nape of the neck and the short hairs could be seen curving like a delicate, silken fringe out of the creamy flesh. She seemed always a thing apart from her clothes. One thought of her naked body. Naked she would probably be beautiful, though her face was far from good-looking. The brow was fine, but the nose splayed out somewhat towards the nostrils, and the holes of the nostrils were curiously round like the nostrils of an animal. She had a large mouth, not beautiful and yet interesting in shape: the sort of mouth that tempted one to take pencil and paper and try to catch its peculiar curve. Her chin was perhaps her best feature — a small, pointed chin that gave a look of wistfulness to the whole face. Yes, a gentle, wistful, slightly simian creature; and listless, muted, and somehow sickly, for one felt always that she had just recovered from a fever. A cold, spent fever oppressed her, extinguished her voice, weighed down her eyelids, gave to her face that look not of suffering but of recent escape from suffering and to her hand that damp, feverish touch which chilled you whenever you shook hands with her.

No! It could not be, I felt now, that there was nothing to know. The coldly feverish quality redeemed her from that, suggested some secret

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stress, deeply hidden. That and her eyes: for her eyes, when on rare occasions the eyelids were raised for a moment, startled you. Not that they were in themselves startling: they were, as I remember them, remarkably calm. But their colour was extraordinary – a clear, light brown, almost golden, and their expression, their meaning, seemed somehow to contradict the meaning of her speech and movements. Strange, disturbing eyes, that brought, whenever one looked into them – and I looked into them only three or four times, I think, during the eight years I knew her – a shock of discovery. ‘Of course!’ one thought each time. ‘Her eyes! I had forgotten her eyes.’ And one began, once again, to revise one’s conception of her, trying to take her eyes into account, so to speak. But in vain. They remained, those two eyes of hers, something outside the Mrs. Grant one knew – a mystery, a contradiction; and, being unaccountable, one forgot them once again. . . .

II

I awoke with a start. The clock on the mantelpiece was dropping, one by one, four round pebbles into the pool of silence. I looked guiltily across at Miss Leppard, but she too was dreaming, and of Irene Grant no doubt, for when I spoke to her – ‘Tell me something, Miss Leppard, about

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Mrs. Grant' – she began at once as though continuing a train of thought.

'I knew Irene, as I said just now, when she was only fourteen, or rather it would be nearer the truth to say that I knew old Mrs. Western her mother, for one didn't get to know Irene even as a child. When I called on her mother Irene was generally invisible – upstairs, her mother said, reading or practising the piano, till sometimes I forgot that Mrs. Western had a child and was surprised to find the funny little thing curled up on the drawing-room sofa beside her mother on the rare occasions when, I suppose, she hadn't had time to escape. And there she sat, very quiet, studying me with her strange eyes.'

'Like a meditative monkey!' I said.

Miss Leppard laughed. 'Well . . . ! Rather, perhaps, a sort of gentle wild cat. She never spoke unless spoken to. Even when her mother tried to draw her out – "Irene went to a tea-party yesterday, didn't you, Irene?" "Is it a Mozart Sonata you are learning now, Irene?" – she never did more than raise those strange topaz eyes for a moment and breathe a little exhausted Yes or No.

'A year or two later, I remember, she fell ill. Nobody seemed to know quite what was the matter. The doctor hinted at some brain trouble. She ate too little, was too much alone, practised

the piano too much. Her mother took her away to the seaside. But the seaside, it seemed, did her no good: the new surroundings did not interest her, and she moped for her piano. Often, her mother told me, she would sit idle for a whole hour in their little lodging-house sitting-room, her right arm extended across the table, the fingers strumming some inaudible tune.'

'But how curious!' I broke in: 'I never knew she played the piano or cared anything at all about music.'

'She gave it up years ago,' replied Miss Leppard, 'but at one time she did little else. I never heard her, for she always refused to play to anyone, even to her mother; but her music-mistress, whom I used to know, told me that she played remarkably well. But to go on — they had not been at the seaside long when Irene caught a chill and was seriously ill for nearly a month. That, strange to say, seemed to do her good. She loved to lie idle all day while her mother or the nurse washed her, combed her hair, fed her, and read to her. Even after she had returned home, quite recovered, she would not rouse herself, but continued to give herself the airs of an invalid. I used sometimes to think that a good shaking . . . However, I was wrong, perhaps. Undoubtedly she was an abnormal child.'

'The next thing I recall,' Miss Leppard continued, 'is a curious incident which occurred when Irene was eighteen. I had gone to pay one of my periodical calls on Mrs. Western. She was alone, as usual, for even at eighteen Irene continued to avoid visitors, taking refuge in her own room and her piano-playing. Her cousin, Ronald Grant, a young man a year older than herself, was the only visitor for whom she could be persuaded to come down; but him she regarded as one of the family.

'On the occasion of which I am speaking, Mrs. Western received me in the dining-room. A plumber was in the drawing-room, she explained, fixing a new chandelier. In Irene's room, too, there was to be a new gas-bracket in a position more convenient for the piano. It was rather an event, I could see, this new chandelier in the drawing-room, and before tea I was taken to inspect it. The plumber had almost finished. We found Irene there, too: she had emerged from her usual apathy and was watching the plumber at work. We also watched for a few minutes and then left her there and returned to the dining-room.

'“Well, I hope you admire it?” said Mrs. Western.

“I do,” I replied; “but still more, my dear, I admire your plumber.”

‘I had even then, you see,’ explained Miss Leppard with a smile, ‘reached the age at which one can confess to admirations for butchers, bakers, plumbers, and candlestick-makers with impunity. When one is younger, one admires but says nothing about it.’

‘Well, this plumber certainly was a remarkable young man to look at. His colouring was what first attracted my attention. His hair was auburn – that bright auburn which, I think, is the liveliest colour in the world, and he had the fresh complexion and blue enamel eyes which so often go with it. His features were regular and rather pronounced: he might have been a young English aristocrat if there had not been something almost sinister about his face and movements – a suggestion of wildness, almost cruelty, so that one thought not so much of an aristocrat as of a savage.’

‘Was he rather short?’

‘Yes, rather short. But why do you ask?’

‘I just wondered. But go on, Miss Leppard.’

‘Yes, rather short, but beautifully built. I remember noticing the smallness and elegance of his hands. You observe, my dear, that I studied the plumber somewhat attentively – much more

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attentively, in fact, than the chandelier, of which, I must confess, I haven't the faintest recollection. Mrs. Western smiled at my remark. "He's a new one," she said. "We haven't had him before."

'Irene joined us for tea. "The chandelier is finished," she said, and I noticed an excitement in her voice and eyes that I had never seen before. Her eyes, which, as you remember, she always kept half-closed, were open. They attracted and disturbed me throughout tea. I don't know how to describe their effect. One felt embarrassed by them, shocked almost, as when at a dinner-party one sees a woman too *décolletée*.

'As soon as she had finished her tea she excused herself. "I want to see," she explained, "that he puts my gas-bracket in the right place."

"Irene," said her mother to me when she had left the room, "is really beginning to come out of her shell. I shall have her doing the housekeeping next."

'She certainly was, it seemed, waking up; but even her waking-up was, I thought, abnormal, for it was rather childish – wasn't it? – in a young woman of over eighteen to get excited about so small a matter as a gas-bracket. However, better that than nothing.'

IV

Miss Leppard stirred in her chair. 'The next occasion on which I saw Irene,' she went on, 'was some weeks later – a month, two months, I don't remember now. I had gone for the afternoon to Broadfield, which, as you know, was our nearest large town. In the Station Square I took a tram, and as I sat in the tram running over a list of books that I was going to get from the library, I heard during one of the many halts the voice of a girl who was sitting in front of me. The tone – small, listless, exhausted – caught my attention at once. It *must* be Irene. I looked up, but from my position immediately behind her I could see nothing of her face, not even a vanishing profile, and as I seldom saw Irene out-of-doors I did not recognize the coat and hat. But the voice had been extraordinarily like. Then came the real surprise; for, sitting next her was a young man with auburn hair. About *him*, at least, there was no mistake. It was my handsome plumber. I watched the girl closely, but she never spoke again and never stirred her head, so that when I got out, before they did, I was still doubtful about her. But how strange, if it *was* Irene, that she should be in Broadfield! I had seen her mother on the previous evening and she had said nothing about it. How still stranger,

too, if it was she, that she should be with my plumber! And yet, *was* she with him? He was sitting near her certainly, and she had spoken once: but after all, if she had found herself beside him in the tram, was it not to be expected that she would say Good afternoon? And then, as so often happens, I began to think that the voice had not, after all, been so very like Irene's, and by the time I got home I was quite sure that the whole idea was nothing but a freak of my own mind.

'But at home I found Mrs. Western waiting to see me in some agitation. Had I by any chance seen Irene? She had slipped out without a word immediately after lunch and had not yet returned. It was now half-past six. The thing would not, of course, have been surprising in any other girl; but Irene never went out alone. Mrs. Western was anxious.

'Well, I found myself without a moment's hesitation replying that I had not seen Irene. It came out pat, almost before I was aware of it. I had instinctively felt, I suppose, that I was on dangerous ground – ground in which, at any rash statement from me, a formidable crop of misconceptions might instantly spring up with Heaven knows what consequences. Most likely the two things were mere coincidence: and it struck me now that I had not even noticed if it was to the plumber

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that the girl had spoken. It might have been to someone on the seat in front of her. How terribly easily, I thought to myself, a scandal can be started! Yes, I was thankful that I had had the presence of mind to rap out that "No" to Mrs. Western.

'Next day I heard that Irene had turned up all right soon after seven. She had simply been for a walk. Mrs. Western, as she told me afterwards, had begun by firing questions at her, but Irene, after twice replying, had grown stubborn and refused to say more, and Mrs. Western, recollecting that to make a fuss when she ventured out of her shell was the quickest way of driving her into it again, checked herself and said no more about it.

'And that was the end of it. Either Irene had been satisfied by a single airing or her mother's behaviour had checked her new confidence. Anyhow, when I went abroad a few months later, she was leading her usual secluded life, practising the piano all day and rarely appearing when I called on her mother.'

v

'And all, I found when I got back, had gone well during my absence,' said Miss Leppard: but almost immediately after that Irene began going

out by herself again. But now it was twice a day, both morning and afternoon, and only for an hour or an hour and a half at a time. What had started her off, it appeared, was that Mrs. Western had been trying recently to persuade her to play the piano to visitors, "for what, after all," she said to me "is the good of all this practising if she never plays to anyone?" But Irene had stubbornly refused and the crisis had come one day when a friend who was fond of music had called. Irene was, as usual, practising away up in her room and Mrs. Western and the friend had tiptoed upstairs and listened at the door. But they had not listened for long when Irene stopped suddenly in the middle of a phrase and opened the door. They were caught. "I thought so!" she said, and shut the door on them, leaving them looking rather foolishly at one another.

'After that, she gave up playing the piano and then, after a week of silence, began this going out. In itself it was rather a thing to be thankful for: it was certainly better for her to be out of doors than shut up in a small room all day. But it soon became apparent that she always went out at the same times, as if she had some appointment, and this, with the fact that she told her mother nothing, began to worry Mrs. Western so much that one day I suggested to her that I should follow Irene.

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If we could find out what she was up to, there would be an end, at least, of suspense.

'I must say I felt rather guilty as I paced up and down the terrace in which the Westerns lived, on the opposite side to their house. It is not exactly pleasant to spy, even in a good cause. It was just upon the hour when Irene was in the habit of going out, and soon, when I was twenty or thirty yards from the house, their gate gave its familiar squeal and out she came and set off in the direction away from me.

'It is more difficult than you may suppose to follow a person in a place where there are many street-corners and a fair number of people about. Sometimes I almost lost sight of her and had to hurry. Sometimes I came round a corner almost on to her heels and had to slow down and look into a shop-window. I am sure detectives must feel much more guilty than the people they follow. Every one, it seemed to me, must notice that I was keeping my eye on Irene: my expression and behaviour, I could feel, were extremely suspicious. Crossing Victoria Square I almost lost her. I was cut off by a tram and then by two cabs, and it was by the merest good luck that I happened to detect her, when I got to shore, on the point of turning down a side-street yards and yards ahead of me. I actually had to run – a respectable middle-aged

lady, my dear, running, apparently after nothing! – for fear of losing her. And it was as well I did, for I reached the corner just in time to see her vanish into a porch half-way down the street.

‘I turned into the porch – one of these modern Gothic affairs – and pushed cautiously through a baize door. It was very dark inside, but I could tell at once by the smell of stale incense – you know that smell: a mixture of burnt paint and burnt sugar – that it was a Roman Catholic church. I stood where I was, just inside the door, waiting for my eyes to grow accustomed to the dimness. A voice muttered far away in the hollow and I could feel that there were people in the place. Evidently a service was going on. I took a step forward and a pink light, hung in mid-air, came into view. Another step disclosed the priest, the altar, and a small, scattered congregation. I had been standing, I saw now, behind a pillar which had hidden all the east end of the church from me. Now I could see clearly enough, and before long I was able to identify Irene. She sat by herself, the sole occupant of one of the foremost rows of chairs. She was conspicuous, but not because she seemed to be a spectator rather than a worshipper, for she knelt, stood, and genuflected with the rest. It was something almost fanatical in her actions that made her so distinct from the rest of the congregation.

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When she bowed it was with a sort of cringing intensity, and when she knelt she threw herself on her knees with an abandonment which was . . . well, almost disgusting. Even her fellow-worshippers were surprised, for from time to time, I noticed, one or other of them would turn to glance at her. When the service was over I lingered until she had gone out and then walked straight back to Mrs. Western's. Irene had already arrived.

'On three or four other occasions either Mrs. Western or I followed her, and it was always to the church, we found, that she went — straight to the church and back — and always, when her mother questioned her, she said she had been for a walk. Strange girl! It seemed as if she could not be happy without some mystery of her own, some secret unprofaned by any other soul; as if, now that her music had been broken into, she had gone off, like a shy bird, and built this new nest where once more she might be safe from intrusion.

'So things continued for some time. Mrs. Western, though Irene's strange secretiveness caused her some anxiety, thought it better to let her follow her own inclinations.

'Then came a day when she did not return home for lunch. Mrs. Western waited till almost teatime: then she came to me. She always came to me, poor thing, when anything went wrong.

We went to Irene's church, but she was not there. A woman sat near the door and we inquired of her where the priest lived. His house was quite close to the church and we found him at home. He knew her, he said, when we had described her, and told us that she had not been to either service that day. It was the first time she had failed, he said, since she had begun to come.

'We returned home after that, hoping she might have come back during our absence, but she was not there. Seven o'clock came and she had not returned. I tried to make light of it, reminding Mrs. Western of the last occasion when she had not returned till evening, but when half-past eight and then nine came it seemed fairly certain that something was wrong. I stayed on with Mrs. Western, and at last, at half-past eleven, I went to the police station.

'She did not return, that time, till two days later. On the afternoon of the second day, at the hour when she always returned from the church, she walked into the house as if nothing whatever had happened. I met her in the hall. "My dear Irene," I said, "wherever have you been?"

'"'Been?" she said, and paused as if reflecting. "I don't know!" Her topaz eyes looked into mine: their expression contradicted what she said. I took her to her mother's room: the poor woman

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was ill with anxiety and I had persuaded her to lie down. But even her mother could get nothing out of her. "I don't know!" was all she replied.

"You remember nothing, Irene?"

"No!" she said – a soft No like a sigh – and again I saw the strange look in her eyes. "*She* doesn't know," they seemed to say, "but we do."

'In spite of her eyes I believed at first that she was lying, for there was a kind of sulkiness in her denials. But her mother believed her, and in the end I came to believe her, too.

'From that time onwards, strange to say, Irene became healthier and more normal than she had ever been before. She gave up her daily visits to the church, consented for the first time in her life to go shopping and pay calls with her mother, and quite often now I found her in the drawing-room when I called. Some months later, on my return from one of my visits abroad, I was surprised by the news that she had just become engaged to her cousin Ronald Grant. She married less than a year later.'

VI

'And that,' Miss Leppard concluded, 'was the end of her eccentricities. You know the rest: you met her . . . let me see . . . about fifteen months later.'

'Yes, just after Milly was born.'

'You wouldn't then, would you, have called her eccentric?'

'Well, only,' I said, 'in her extraordinary lack of character. She was certainly the most colourless and correct woman I have ever met: as I said just now, the sort of woman of whom one felt that nothing had ever happened to her, or ever would happen.'

'Or ever would happen!' Miss Leppard repeated laconically and threw up her hands in a little gesture of despair. 'And then, six months ago, this bombshell. No warning. No kind of symptoms, apparently.'

'Nothing. Simply, one morning, she had disappeared.'

'And they have no theories, I'm told.'

'None, I believe.'

'I wonder,' said Miss Leppard reflectively, 'if her husband knew anything of her former escapades. Probably not: her mother, poor thing, seldom spoke of them. Yet if, as we believed, she really remembered nothing of her previous disappearance, might not this be another instance of loss of memory? Such cases do occur, and they have been known, I believe, to last more than six months.'

'I have a different theory,' I said; 'or, at least,

some evidence for one. It occurred to me only a few minutes ago. Your story, Miss Leppard, has recalled two things to my mind. The first I had long forgotten: it happened soon after the Grants came to live here. Milly was only a tiny thing: Ida hadn't yet arrived. I had gone, for the first time in my life, into the Mitre Hotel. You probably haven't noticed it: a very second-rate place near the station. I had gone there, as a matter of fact, to interview a housemaid. I interviewed her in a rather grubby sort of writing-room and as I came out of it I caught sight of Mr. and Mrs. Grant coming downstairs. At least, I recognized Mrs. Grant and assumed as a matter of course that the man was Mr. Grant. I was surprised to see them in the Mitre: it isn't the sort of place where one expects to meet one's friends. That, I suppose, was what made me glance at them again. Then I saw that the man was not Mr. Grant — nothing like him, in fact; and at that moment they reached the bottom of the stairs and Mrs. Grant crossed the hall to the hotel entrance and went out. The man remained behind and went to the desk. Then, for the first time, it occurred to me that they had never really been together at all. They had both simply happened, when I caught sight of them, to be coming downstairs at the same moment. Still it *was* strange to see Mrs. Grant in the Mitre,

though no more strange, of course, than the fact that I myself was there.

'Next minute I too was out in the street, and a few days later, I suppose, the incident must have passed from my mind. But there was one other thing I must have noticed, for your story suddenly recalled it to me. The man had bright auburn hair. It was that, in fact, which first made me realize that he was not Mr. Grant. I did not see his face, but I noticed also that he was short and extraordinarily well built.

'The second thing that has come back to me happened one or two days before Mrs. Grant disappeared. A man came to the door and asked if the Grants lived here. Kate was busy and I answered the door myself. Well, I directed him next door and thought no more about him. But he too was small and red-haired and he had exactly the features, as you described them, of your handsome plumber.'

Miss Leppard sat silent for a while. Then, 'That fits in rather painfully well,' she remarked, 'with the other things.' Again she relapsed into silence, and then waved a hand at the van at the gate and remarked, as if dismissing the subject: 'Well, no wonder he's leaving the place, poor fellow, after all this wretched business!'

Many months later Miss Leppard and I sat talking again.

'Did you see,' she asked me, 'that Ronald Grant got his divorce? He, of course,' she went on, 'got the custody of the children, but I hear that, as a result of some kind of arrangement between him and Irene, the younger one has been handed over to her.'

'Ida!' I said; and, suddenly enlightened, I added: 'The red-haired one!'

Miss Leppard gasped and then looked at me inquiringly. 'Goodness! It never occurred to me!' she said.

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THE ROAD, DIVING DOWNWARDS OFF THE bridge, slid away to the left; but tucked into a low recess on the right, so that it looked down upon the river and up at the high, foreshortened mass of the bridge, the George Inn opened its comfortable, L-shaped front, thick with climbing greenery. Behind it a flourishing kitchen-garden stood embanked above the river to which steps descended under a canopy of ancient elm-trees.

Michael Dunne, having finished his breakfast, appeared in the doorway and stood looking up at the sky. Then he lowered his eyes to the scene before him and slowly drew in his breath. It was delicious to be in the country again. The trees, loaded mound upon mound with fresh young green; the pervading hush of the river; the soft clean air tinged with the smell of wet earth and standing water breathed up from the river edge, thrilled him with indescribable delight. He glanced again at the sky. It was bright, too bright, at present, but there were light clouds in the blue and a gentle breeze: there would certainly be intervals of dullness. Not, on the whole, a bad day for fishing. He had made up two fishing-casts overnight, seated in the bow-window of the sitting-room with half a dozen trout-flies hanging

from his mouth. When the gut was sufficiently soaked, he drew out the flies one by one and carefully knotted them on to the cast. He had decided to use nothing but March Browns, and old Wales, the landlord, had entirely agreed when Dunne had mentioned it to him.

He was ready to start now at any moment, and he stood there in the doorway with his hands in his breeches-pockets, impatiently waiting for the sun to stop shining. From time to time in the inn behind him footsteps tapped along the stone-floored passage and died away. But at last he was roused by some that came closer and closer still and finally stopped just behind his back. He swung round. Somebody was waiting to be allowed to pass: a young woman. With a quick apology Dunne moved out of her way and she came out, thanking him with a smile as she passed him, and moved away along the front of the inn, a slim figure in a brown coat and skirt. A white-handled umbrella hung from her left arm: her right hand carried a camp-stool and a satchel.

Dunne stood watching her. It was as if in its flying course an invisible flame had swept over him, for the brief glimpse of her face had thrilled him suddenly and profoundly. Only two or three times before had that curious experience befallen him, for he was not easily attracted by women.

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He stood now, immovable, gazing after her with flushed face, till she vanished round the corner of the house: then he turned back into the inn, his sense resounding with the impression of her. In a few minutes, he reappeared, preceded by the slim point of his rod. He had put on his waders and an old cap stuck with one or two gaudy salmon-flies; a creel hung at his left side. His emotion at the sight of the beautiful girl had died down; he was calm again, and now he began to make his way down the little garden path under the elm-trees, carefully pointing the wavering tip of the rod into the spaces between the thick hanging foliage. At the river's edge he paused to survey again the grey and golden bridge whose four stone arches towered above him a stone's throw away to his right. Under the two nearest, at this time of the year, there was nothing but dry gravel, thickly overgrown near the bank with a jungle of wild rhubarb. Under the third, the water, brown and clear as ale, babbled shallow over the pebbles. It was only under the fourth, where it washed the farther bank, that the water was deep.

Dunne clambered down, holding his rod carefully in front of him, and began to push through the great funnel-shaped rhubarb leaves. Then, crunching across the gravel-bed, he waded through the shallows to a little island within a short cast of

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a round pool, the very place for a trout. He had watched them rising there on the previous evening as he stood, an hour after his arrival, leaning idly over the parapet of the bridge. It was a deep, round pool, slowly stirred by a circular eddy which swung the streaks of floating spume into narrowing whorls, so that it looked, from above, like a huge polished ammonite. He had decided to fish upstream from that point.

It was years, four years at least, since he had last had a day's fishing, but as he began casting up to the head of the pool, he recovered at once that delicious mood peculiar to the fisherman – a mood composed of conscious craft, expectation, and at the same time a quiet passivity laying the mind open to streams of thoughts and ideas which flow through the brain easily as the flowing of the river, washing it clean of complexities.

The breeze had almost died down. Not a fish was stirring. And, moving slowly upstream, he worked leisurely on for half an hour without getting a single bite. But just as he reached the lower end of another promising pool – a gently swirling pool fed by a narrow and copious flow – the breeze freshened again and the day clouded over. It was ideal now – grey, and with just the right purl on the water.

The fish were beginning to feed. A small one

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rose in the pool a few yards from where he stood; then, just under the bank, another, a larger one. The sudden musical splash sounded clear and sharp above the monotonous babbling of the water. Then, as though his line were a nerve identifying the finger that held it with every movement of the floating fly, he felt three electric tugs. The end of his rod curved into a hoop, and he began to play the trout.

It was only, he knew at once, a small one — something over a quarter of a pound perhaps; and, though it fought gamely, as a trout always does, Dunne landed it at once. It lay for a moment motionless on the pebbles with helpless, gaping mouth: but as he stooped to take hold of it, suddenly it began to twist and wriggle, tense as a steel spring. Dunne caught it, grasping the firm, wincing body in his left hand while with his right he began to work the hook free of its mouth, twisting and wrenching the pale, talc-like flesh. Then, stooping again, he struck its head against a stone. It lay motionless in his palm now, a limp, exquisite shape of silver, gold, and brown. The delicate cucumber scent of it rose to his nostrils. Between a quarter and half a pound he thought, and dropped it into his creel.

A few minutes later, soon after he had begun to cast again, Dunne experienced a curious repetition

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of the physical sensation of striking the soft, unresisting creature against the stone. A little shudder ran through his vitals. Curious! Could it have been something disagreeable in the sound of it, or in the sense of the too hard striking the too soft? He shuddered again, but less perceptibly, and then the ceaseless tinkle of the water smoothed the faint scar from his mind. Peaceably, incoherently his thoughts swirled with the swirling clusters of bubbles.

But soon he was thinking coherently again. What was it that happened when he struck the trout's head against the stone and all its exquisite mechanism stopped for ever? Was it nothing more than that he broke the delicate motor housed in the little box in the skull? No more than the smashing of a watch? Years ago, old Mr. Worston, the peppery old gentleman who always gave him a sovereign when he went back to school after the summer holidays, smashed his watch against the wall in Hexham station because it was slow and had made him miss the express. Smash! Swinging it the full length of the heavy gold chain. A pulp of little gold wheels and broken glass. Delightful thought! It had delighted him as a boy and it delighted him still. But a watch is hard. To smash something hard . . . a bottle or an egg against a wall . . . how satisfying! But to

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hit a fish . . . a limp, soft fish . . . and alive! Another faint shudder. All the leaves on the river bank hissed and rustled suddenly: hurrying grey spearheads shot along the surface of the stream. The wind was freshening.

A twitch. A palpitating tug. He had hooked another; and a few minutes after that there was another, and then another—a much larger one. Such a game one it was that Dunne thought for a moment that it must be a salmon-trout. When he landed it, the hook was fixed in the extreme tip of the lower jaw: it was a wonder it had held. A fine fish, fully a pound, the tarnished silver sides spotted with rose. Dunne gazed at it fascinated, curiously inspecting the staring, expressionless eyes, set like the work of a master jeweller in the subtly moulded bronze of the head. The slippery body thrilled and stiffened spasmodically in his clenched fingers. Its slipperiness was beginning already to grow viscous against his palm. The foolish mouth gaped patiently, sufferingly, and Dunne suddenly recalled the blanched, tight-lipped mouth of a dying man whom, years ago, he had visited in hospital. He felt his heart contract under his ribs. Then, throwing off his morbid fancies, he stooped down and struck the trout's head against a stone, as he had struck the other. The body stiffened: the tail curved up tensely like

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a spring. He struck it again and then loosened his grip. The second blow had done it: the body was limp and flaccid now: the life was gone.

Gone where? Could the life be something distinct from the body it actuated . . . could it fly out and escape from the killed fish? A shadow . . . a little puff of cigarette-smoke, detaching itself from the fish's mouth . . . floating away? Life must be the same as what some people call the soul . . . The immortality of the soul . . . A fish's soul . . . Jesu, lover of my soul. A flood of the emotion which that hymn always produced in him as a boy. Ancient memories . . . sentimental . . . absurd!

A touch on his face, soft, fluttering. Here he was, standing up to his thighs in water, fishing. A gust of wind was furrowing the water and blowing his line along in a great bow. He reeled in a few yards of it. The breeze stiffened: all his fisherman's skill was needed now, and for the next few minutes his attention was concentrated on throwing a clean line in defiance of the breeze. But it had only been a momentary flurry: soon it had swept on downstream and with the return of calm Dunne dropped back into his former line of thought. . . .

Fishes are cold-blooded creatures without feeling. A comforting idea, but false — mere

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metaphor and simile drawn from human experience. We know nothing outside our own narrow circle of experience, can never escape into the universal where everything is true and equal. A simple thing to beat the life out of a trout; and yet, when we have done it, what have we done? A mystery. A tremendous act of whose consequences we know nothing. Who can tell? perhaps the death of a fish changes irrevocably the whole hidden scheme of things. And yet, wherever there is life, there must be death. All life devours life, even the sheep and cows that munch grass. Life feeding on life. Life destroying life that it may live. An endless process . . . process . . . progress . . . progression . . . the scheme of things . . . stream of things . . .

The stream had caught his mind again, caressing it, floating it safely away from all those jarring, sharp-edged thoughts. But now the fish had stopped taking and during the next hour Dunne caught nothing. Yet he fished on, soothed by the peacefully sliding river, his mind sliding with the water over rough and smooth, deep and shallow. Then, discovering that he was hungry, he looked at his watch and began to wade towards the bank.

There he sat down and took out his flask and sandwiches. But before beginning to eat he opened his creel, tumbled out the contents, and

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arranged them in a row on the grass. They were a nice lot – seven fish ranging from a quarter to half a pound and, at the end, the noble one-pounder. They were dull and gummy now; their clean slipperiness was gone, their iridescence faded. Dunne gazed at them until his mind slipped out of the grooves of habit and again he was gazing at fish for the first time in his life. Strange, unbelievable creatures; mysterious slips of life, swift and spear-like, marvellously designed and coloured. He stared at their eyes; for a man, baffled by man or beast, always stares at the eye, that smouldering window of the spirit, and there finds some partial answer to his question. But these quaint metallic disks, stark as the painted eyes of a mask, told him nothing except that their secret was undiscoverable or that there was nothing to discover. They did not even rebuke him, like the eye of a dead bird or animal, for snatching them from their secret world and slaughtering them. Dunne sighed and next moment shrugged his shoulders. After all, such questions as he was asking have no answer. Neither philosophy nor religion casts any light on them. To what category, then, can they belong? To poetry, perhaps: and Dunne, being no poet, but a solicitor and a fisherman, threw the trout back one by one into the creel and began to eat his sandwiches.

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The sun came out. He looked anxiously at the sky: this would play the devil with his afternoon. But meanwhile it was delicious to feel its warmth on his back, stealing through coat and shirt. He finished his last sandwich, lit a cigarette, and leaned back full length on the grass. Although the sun was still shining, clouds covered more than half the sky: there was certainly some hope, now, for the afternoon. A luxurious drowsiness overcame him: he closed his eyes for a moment then opened them again. Then he closed them again and this time they remained closed. The cigarette fell from his fingers and lay twining a blue spiral among the tall green grass-blades. . . .

He was still fishing. The little brass rings on his rod had sprouted into green leaf-buds. He was fishing in a stream of liquid gold, the Gulf Stream. All at once he noticed that his line was running out noiselessly . . . longer . . . longer . . . longer. He clasped it to the butt of the rod, gripped it with all his strength. When he had almost given up hope, he succeeded at last in holding it. Then slowly he began to reel in, and as he did so the reel tinkled a little tune like a musical-box. It was a heavy fish – a pound at least. He reeled away strenuously until he had reeled the cast right out of the water.

A beautiful wooden fish, streaked with scarlet

THE FISHERMAN

and blue, hung from the end of it. A Chinese fish. Each eye was a gold disk with a daisy in the centre of it. He began to sway the rod so that the fish swung to and fro. When it was at the top of its swing he suddenly dipped the rod and the fish dropped on the bank. But the moment it touched earth it began to cry – a horrible human cry. ‘No! No!’ it cried. ‘No! No! No!’ He stood staring at it, appalled, not daring to touch it. Then, bracing himself, he suddenly put his foot on it and immediately swooped upon it to remove the hook. The fish did not move, but its mouth opened and shut spasmodically like an automatic toy and, to his horror, it began to cry again. But soon its voice flagged, died away, fainter . . . fainter . . . It had become almost inaudible when suddenly, as if summoning its last strength, it shouted aloud a single sharp ‘Ah!’

Dunne awoke. A shaggy dog stood looking at him wagging its tail. He held out his hand to it and sat up, but the dog flounced away and trotted off along the bank with its tail down. Dunne looked about him. The sun had gone in: conditions were perfect once again. He felt refreshed and clear-headed after his sleep and, scrambling to his feet, he pocketed his flask, took up his rod and creel, and began to work slowly downstream.

During the afternoon he added eight good fish

THE FISHERMAN

to his catch, and by five o'clock he had got back to the point from which he had started. He reeled in and, securing his cast, waded to the bank. He was looking forward to showing the fish to old Wales. Mrs. Wales would fry the best of them for dinner: she knew how to fry trout perfectly, rolling them first in oatmeal and serving them with melted butter. He climbed up the bank to the little path and, with his rod pointed in front of him, began to make his way cautiously under the elm-trees. In the creel behind him a trout not yet dead kept up a dry, persistent rustling.

As he came out in front of the inn he became aware of something unusual. A little group of people was moving towards the door. They were stooping as if carrying something. A few yards from the bridge an empty motor stood at the roadside.

When Dunne came up with the moving group they had reached the inn door. They were carrying something laid on a large sack, as on a stretcher, and with a sudden constriction of the heart he caught sight, between two of the bearers, of an end of brown skirt hanging over the edge of the sack. Hardly knowing what he did, he propped his rod against the house-wall and, turning his back on the door, walked away towards the standing car. His instinct had been to escape from

THE FISHERMAN

something unbearable. Then, pausing dazed where the road dipped from the bridge, he saw lying at the roadside between him and the car a white-handled umbrella. He stooped and gently picked it up and began to carry it to the inn. He felt vaguely that he had found something that he could do for her.

The bearers had vanished indoors. Dunne entered the stone-flagged hall with its pleasant, humble smell of beer and sawdust. A group of women – Mrs. Wales and the three servants – stood with their backs to him at an open door, their heads craning into a great bare room. It was a room unused except in summer-time when large parties came to the inn for lunch or tea. Several people were inside. A table was being moved. Dunne, still holding her umbrella, paused beside the women.

‘What happened?’ he whispered.

One of the maids turned a white face to him. ‘The car knocked her down,’ she replied. ‘It must have come on her when she was crossing the road.’

Another turned. ‘They come so unexpected over that bridge,’ she said.

Old Mrs. Wales was leaning against the doorpost with her apron to her eyes. Dunne touched her arm. ‘Is she . . . is she much hurt?’ he asked.

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The old woman raised her bleared face from the apron and stared at him vacantly. Then her chin began to tremble. 'Hurt? She's dead, poor thing!' she whispered.

*

Twenty-five years later Dunne himself died. He was a bachelor, and his things went to his nephews. They had spent several days in his house, going through cupboards and drawers. Last of all they looked into the attic. It was half dark, but one of them, rummaging among old hatboxes and portmanteaux, pulled out a creel and a fishing-rod in a canvas case. Both the creel and the case were cloaked with the grey wool of cobwebs.

'I say, look at this!' the young man called to his brother. 'I never knew the Uncle was a fisherman.'

AN EXPLOSION

MILDRED WOULD HAVE BEEN SURPRISED AND indignant if anyone had told her that she hated Edward. An idea so unusual had never occurred to her, even though, if she had been able to examine herself honestly, she would have found a formidable mass of evidence to support it, for she often made herself extremely disagreeable to him. But that, she would have objected, was his fault, not hers. He was devoted to her, of course — there was no question of that — ‘as devoted now, poor Edward, as on the day of our marriage,’ she used to explain to her women-friends. The trouble was that, despite his devotion, he didn’t understand her, was simply incapable of appreciating her highly-strung, sensitive nature.

It was when she had one of her nerve-attacks that he always became most unbearable. Not that he was intentionally unsympathetic: on the contrary, it was by hovering round and trying to help that he irritated her. Whatever he did and said on these occasions was always the wrong thing; and if he did and said nothing, that, she felt, was more annoying still. Yet if Mildred had been asked to suggest the ideal behaviour for Edward during these crises, she would not have been able to reply. But, after all, how could *she* be expected to know?

AN EXPLOSION

You can hardly expect the sufferer herself to dictate the kindnesses which would mean so much to her. That, surely, must be left to the intuition and delicate feeling of those about her.

Mildred's nerves never left her alone for long; indeed, they had come, by degrees, to dominate not only her own life but also Edward's. Even on the rare occasions when she and Edward could afford a holiday, it was her nerves that dictated where they were to go. What with her headaches and sleeplessness, there were so few places that suited them. Even the doctors didn't understand her. Last summer her latest doctor had ordered the East Coast: Whitby, of all places! That, of course, was absurd: she herself had said so from the first; but Edward, for once, had insisted. He pointed out, with a deadly reasonableness, that it was useless to go from doctor to doctor without ever carrying out the instructions of any of them: that it was right to suppose that a doctor who had made a special study of nervous cases knew better what a patient needed than the patient herself. In fact Edward had insisted on Whitby, and Mildred, with a sigh and a shrug of her shoulders, had yielded. One got tired, in the end, of struggling against people who never even tried to understand one. But events had proved her right. Two days before they were to have started she was assailed

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by such a serious attack that the visit had to be postponed. 'My poor Edward,' she had said, raising her large eyes to his as he stood at her bedside, 'I knew how it would be.' That was all: not a word of reproach to anyone. But the doctor, as it turned out, had been firm about Whitby. Four days later he had pronounced her not only fit to travel but actually in urgent need of the very air which, it appeared, Whitby alone could supply; and to Whitby they had gone. But, once again, Mildred proved to have been right. Her nerves at Whitby were worse, much worse, than ever — so bad, indeed, that Edward still looked back on that holiday with horror, for never once did Mildred's nerves allow her to be even tolerable company. Throughout their visit she would neither do anything nor say anything, and nothing that Edward could do was any good. If he sat with her, offered to read to her, or to get for her anything she might want, it only seemed to irritate her; and if, seeing that he irritated her, he left her and went for a walk, then she felt aggrieved. 'Of course, my poor dear, I mustn't expect you to sit all day with an invalid,' she would say, looking sadly into his eyes.

At last, even Mildred herself began to be a little surprised at her attitude towards Edward. Why was she always so disagreeable to him? She did

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not know, herself. An irresistible impulse goaded her. The smallest thing would start it. One day, as they sat in the gardens listening to the band, Edward had remarked that it was chilly and with a little shiver Mildred had agreed.

‘Wouldn’t you like me to get your coat?’ he asked.

That was enough. Instantly Mildred felt irritable. Why must he always ask questions, always lay the obligation of choice upon *her*? She really wanted her coat, but it was hateful to her to have to say Yes. It amounted to asking him a favour. ‘No, thank you!’ she replied.

‘But you said you felt chilly. You’d better let me get it.’

She shook her head impatiently. ‘I said “No, thank you,” Edward!’ How annoying he was; and still more annoying when, as he always did, he took her at her word! For what Mildred really wanted him to do was to get the coat either without asking her at all or else in spite of her refusal. Then she would have either accepted it with a petulant, protesting sigh or thrown it aside, reminding him: ‘But I *told* you, Edward, I didn’t want it.’

The climax came one morning towards the end of their visit. Mildred had begun the day with impenetrable sulks, but after breakfast she had

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consented to go for a stroll and had gone to her room to get ready. Edward sat waiting for her in the hall. He waited an hour; then, as she still failed to appear, he went to her room. But Mildred was not in her room. He looked into the drawing-room on his way downstairs, but the drawing-room too was empty. At last he found her in the lounge. She was sitting in an easy chair staring idly in front of her. She had not even put on her hat.

'Why, Mildred . . . !' he said, going up to her chair. But Mildred took no notice of him. 'Aren't you coming?' he asked. 'I've been waiting for you all this time.'

Mildred looked up at him. 'No!' she replied, and immediately turned away her head.

'You're not feeling well?'

'Quite. Thanks!' She hardly opened her mouth to let out the two dry monosyllables.

'Do you intend to sit here all morning?'

Mildred nodded sulkily. It was clear that she intended to give no explanation of her change of mind.

Edward stood bewildered. What could he do? He had no notion, even after all these years, how to deal with these moods. 'Perhaps,' he suggested, 'you would like some papers to read?'

'No, thanks!' She began to beat time irritably with one foot.

Edward laid a hand on her shoulder. 'There's really nothing I can do for you?'

She suddenly raised her eyes. 'You can go away,' she broke out with extreme ill-temper, 'and leave me in peace.'

Edward drew back. 'For how long?' he asked. The question, simple creature that he was, was asked in perfect innocence. He was ready, if only she would say when, to return as soon as ever she wanted him to return. It did not occur to him that his question, to one already in a bad temper, was an exasperating one.

Mildred turned from him with a quick gesture of hatred. 'Oh, go! For God's sake, go!' As she spoke she stamped her foot, as though words alone could never express the violence of her irritation. Then she covered her eyes with her hands, as if to shut him out. Never before had she exhibited a loathing so undisguised.

That, for Edward, had been the end of it. At that moment the last pallid remains of his sorely-tried love had been extinguished. Externally it made little difference. Mildred noticed no change in his behaviour to her except on those rare occasions when it suited her to be sweet and forgiving — those occasions when she would smile up at him, lay her hands on his shoulders, and murmur: 'Poor dear! Your delicate wife is a great trial,

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isn't she?' At such moments she began to be aware that Edward's responses had lost something of their old ardour. They had become detached, even summary. 'All right, old girl!' he would say, and before Mildred realized what was happening he had kissed her and brought the incident to an abrupt close. It was a little surprising, a little disrespectful, from a man so utterly devoted to his wife: however, it was, after all, only another sign that Edward, however much he might love her in his simple, crude way, never really understood her.

But for Edward himself the difference was tremendous. Mildred had been enough of a trial when he loved her: but now that his love for her was dead it seemed that life had lost all its savour. His work at the office kept him busy, of course, for the greater part of the day, but now there was no alleviation in the hours spent at home. Boxed in a small house with an ill-tempered woman no longer loved, whose unstable moods he still felt it his duty to indulge, he felt his life becoming daily more colourless and more unbearable. His youth and gaiety began to wither: he grew subject to fits of depression which he found more and more difficult to resist. Most terrible of all was the certainty that the future held no relief. For the rest of his life he was doomed to the dreary alternation of office and home, broken only by the

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still more desolating holiday with this soul-destroying woman.

Then, out of the blue, had come that astonishing letter. He had found it waiting for him among his other correspondence one morning when he arrived at the office. Having read it, he sat with it lying before him, immovable, dazed, slowly and gradually realizing, as in some wonderfully unfolding dream, the incredible meaning of what it announced to him. He must have sat idle for over an hour when at last he roused himself to write the letters which the surprising event required.

During the next few days Edward went about his affairs like a man in a trance. He was bewildered, dazzled. Morning, noon, and night it filled his thoughts. His mind was busy with plans and schemes: his emotions were in a state of intense but strangely peaceful ferment. It was as if his mind and soul were growing, developing, like a flower in sunshine.

Until every detail was settled he said nothing to Mildred. To tell her would only have led to endless arguments, discussions, and scenes, and on the main point his mind had already been made up within an hour of receiving the news. But a week later, when the morning mail brought him the assurance that the last detail of business was

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settled, he decided that the moment had come to break the news.

They had just begun breakfast. It was not perhaps the most favourable moment, for Mildred had come down in one of her sulkiest moods and when Edward, holding up the letter, said to her, 'I should like, Mildred, before I start for the office, to talk over rather an important matter with you,' her face clouded at once. 'Not now, please, Edward!' she replied.

'As you like, my dear. Only, it is rather urgent and it would be more convenient not only for me but also for you. . . .'

Mildred closed her eyes with that air of long-suffering which was one of her favourite retorts, and repeated once again, as if for the benefit of a supremely stupid person: '*Not* now, please, Edward.'

Edward shrugged his shoulders and put the letter in his pocket. When he returned home that afternoon he found Mildred playing the piano. She did not stop when he entered the room: she did not so much as turn her head.

Edward raised his voice above the music. 'About this business matter, Mildred,' he began.

Mildred turned her head, but did not stop playing. 'Wait, Edward! Wait! Can't you hear I'm in the middle of a piece?'

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Edward waited and Mildred played on. He knew the piece and he knew that she was deliberately playing it much more slowly than she usually played it. When at last she reached the final chord, he rose to his feet.

'Now, Mildred . . . !' he said. But Mildred was still playing. She was improvising chords and arpeggios. Her hands wandered idly and listlessly over the keys. Edward, exasperated beyond endurance, took up a china bowl which stood on a table beside him and sent it crashing into the grate.

That at least stopped the music. With a shriek Mildred leapt from her seat and turned on him. 'How dare you!' she screamed, quivering and breathless. 'How dare you do that!' and she began to whimper hysterically. But something in Edward's face silenced her. He spoke quietly, but Mildred had noticed the quick swelling and contracting of his nostrils.

'Are you going to listen or are you not?' he asked.

For a moment Mildred stared back at him dumbly. She was struggling between rage and a new sense of fear. 'No!' she said at last.

'Very well!' Edward turned on his heel and made for the door.

'Where are you going, Edward?' she asked tremulously.

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'Out!'

'Where to?'

'Out!' he shouted. 'Out! Anywhere! Tooting! Blackpool! the Ural Mountains!'

She had never seen Edward so furious. The foolish, comic words made his fury the more alarming. She had carried her stubbornness too far: something must be done.

Suddenly she became all soft gentleness. 'Anywhere, to get away from me!' she murmured reproachfully.

'Exactly!' answered Edward.

'Edward, how can you say such unkind things to me!'

'It was you who said it, my dear. Why deny yourself the credit for it, especially as it's true!'

Mildred's heart was beginning to flutter. This, in Edward, was something new. What had happened? Had she lost her control over him? 'Edward,' she whimpered, 'I believe you hate me!'

'You're right, Mildred. I do.'

For a moment Mildred's face was sullen, then her expression changed and she went up to him and laid her hands on his shoulders. 'You're very naughty this evening!' she cooed.

But Edward stepped back, wrenching his shoulders from her grasp. 'Don't be a fool!' he said. 'I'm in no mood for pawing and purring.'

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I'm sick of these endless sulks and reconciliations – sick of them, do you hear?' He shouted the words at her so loudly that Mildred raised her hands to her ears.

'Edward! Edward! My nerves!'

'Damn your nerves!' he shouted. 'What about *my* nerves! Do you ever think of *them*? You pretend you're a poor little invalid with delicate nerves: perhaps you believe it yourself by this time: but you're wrong. You're simply a creature of whims and moods – nice when it suits you to be, damnable when it doesn't – simply an idle, discontented, selfish, tyrannical woman with no sense of decency and an iron constitution.'

He paused, breathless, and, noticing his breathlessness, laughed. 'There!' he said, grown suddenly calm. 'I feel better. Now sit down, please, and listen to my business. It affects you rather closely.'

Mildred sat down obediently. This sudden calmness of Edward's was even more disquieting than his anger.

'An uncle of mine,' he began, 'whom I have never seen – he lived all his life abroad – has just died and left me twenty thousand pounds. Surprising, isn't it, Mildred? That means a thousand a year. And do you realize what a thousand a year means? It means that we are free, Mildred.'

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‘Free, Edward?’

‘Yes, indeed. Free. It means that you are free from me and I am free from you. Do you see? Money is a wonderful thing, Mildred. It has been so simple for me, for instance, to open an account in your name at the bank and arrange that two hundred and fifty pounds shall be paid into it every half-year. As for myself, on my way home just now I bought myself a ticket for . . . well, for a place whose name I need not mention – a place on the Continent. I start this evening at nine-thirty.’

Mildred stared at him aghast. ‘But . . . but . . .’ she began.

Edward interrupted her. ‘We won’t discuss it, Mildred. Everything, you see, is already settled: in fact, I have a taxi coming in . . .’ – he took out his watch – ‘in twenty minutes. I must go and pack at once.’

He turned from her and strode to the door and next moment Mildred heard his feet on the stairs. She stood beside the chair in which she had sat all the time he had been speaking, staring, dazed and bewildered, in front of her. After standing immovable for what seemed at least an hour, she dropped back into the chair. Edward’s footsteps in the bedroom overhead kept up an endless come and go. Through her stupor she heard a taxi

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stop at the front-door: then the door-bell rang and, almost immediately after, there were steps on the stairs and the door behind her opened. She raised her eyes. Edward stood in the half-open door way.

‘Good-bye,’ he said. ‘I’m off.’

For a moment it seemed as if he were coming towards her. Then abruptly he checked himself and, before she had moved or spoken, she found herself staring stupidly at the closed door. He had gone. And, when the taxi drove away a minute later, she was still staring.

MY POOR DEAR UNCLE

EVERY TABLE IN THE RESTAURANT WAS FILLED. Showers of lights hung from the lofty ceiling, dwarfing the activity below, where, among the white of table-linen, the black and white of dress-suits, the patches of bright and various colours and the subdued sparkle of the women's dresses and jewels, waiters carrying dishes and bottles threaded noiselessly among the tables over the thick-piled crimson carpet. Everywhere there was a sense of ease, good manners, refined indifference – everywhere except at a round table in a corner at which sat four old gentlemen. Here there was no indifference: on the contrary things were humming – rising, as it were, by well-sustained degrees to some yet unrealized climax. The old boys ate and drank assiduously, devoutly; and, as each new dish or bottle was seen to be approaching, they turned their attention to it with the undisguised and innocent zest of children, welcoming it to their bosoms with a twinkling of eyes, an expansion of smiles, and a joyful rubbing of palms.

For this was an occasion – an occasion which happened only twice in the year. Twice in the year these old gentlemen – Mr. Puffinlow, Mr. Lipscombe, Colonel Anstruther, and the irresistible Mr. Freddie Cumberbatch – would meet

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together in London for the mere purpose of dining. And dine they did, sumptuously and unforgettably. For a week before the occasion the menu was the object of careful and anxious thought which ended in a preliminary visit to the restaurant where in a private room Mr. Freddie Cumberbatch sat in close and earnest consultation with M. Arnaud the chef.

But although, as has been said, there was a definite and unique character in their demonstrations in the presence of food and drink, a closer attention revealed individual differences. Mr. Puffinlow – who was turnip-headed, bleary-eyed, wore a walrus moustache, and laughed through his nose – showed in his transports a certain seriousness, a tenacity and a rolling of the eye which betrayed the gourmand under the gourmet. Mr. Lipscombe, a barrister, was cooler and more restrained in his actions, though the boyish gleam of his eye and the set of the clean-shaved, epicurean mouth, somewhat drawn-in between the keen, intellectual nose and chin, were enough to destroy any suggestion of apathy. The Colonel, on the other hand, turned upon each new bottle or dish that regard of penetrating ferocity with which he had been accustomed to inspect recruits. But not for long: for very soon his fine, frost-bitten features dissolved into an enraptured smile and his

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eyes danced jocularly as he adjusted his eye-glass for a closer examination. But it was from Mr. Freddie Cumberbatch that the true spirit of the party radiated. His round, rosy face, his close, sandy moustache and side whiskers, his dancing, flaming blue eyes, his little round paunch and the whole of his plump little body glowed with the purest and most innocent joy. It was the joy of the babe at the sight of his mother, of the angels in heaven over the sinner that repents. He it was and Mr. Puffinlow who did most of the talking. The Colonel would occasionally tell a brief and pointed story of strange occurrences in remote lands, or interject a highly-charged snarl: at intervals Mr. Lipscombe with the nicest adjustment would let fall into the conversation a dry, acidulated drop which threw the party into a sudden delighted ferment; but for the most part Mr. Cumberbatch wove his glittering symphonies, and Mr. Puffinlow his more solemn fugues, uninterrupted.

Both were well worth listening to, though it cannot be denied that Mr. Puffinlow tended, as the bottle went round, to drop into too serious and too persevering a vein. His talk was still good and various, but it lacked the sparkle of Mr. Cumberbatch's, and it would sometimes rather tiresomely revert, as the evening went on, to persons and themes already satisfactorily disposed of.

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Thus, on the evening which we are considering, Mr. Puffinlow had already, before the end of the fish, referred three times to 'my poor dear Uncle,' and no sooner had they got to work on a divinely tender duckling and the youngest and greenest of young green peas than Mr. Puffinlow introduced 'my poor dear Uncle' for the fourth time.

'Green peas,' he said, 'really delicious green peas, such as these are, always bring back to me my poor dear Uncle.'

'My dear Puffin,' said Mr. Freddie Cumberbatch, 'in the name of all the saints, don't spoil these peas – nobody can touch Arnaud at peas – exquisite, superb, one of the greatest moments of my life – I shall congratulate him afterwards – don't spoil them, Puffin, by allowing any thought whatever to intrude. Let your Uncle, by all means, recall green peas, but don't, for the Lord's sake, let green peas recall your Uncle or anything else in the world or out of it. Let them recall simply and solely green peas, and again green peas, and yet again . . .' Mr. Cumberbatch completed this lyrical outburst by lifting, with eyes ecstatically upturned, a forkful of peas to his mouth. 'Younger,' he sang, 'tenderer, even than the duckling! Let us regard them, Puffin, simply as things in themselves, unrelated to anything else whatever.'

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'I doubt,' objected the measured voice of Mr. Lipscombe, 'that it is possible to regard anything as a thing in itself. It is only when we relate it to something else that we become aware of it at all.'

'Quite! Quite, Lippie!' yapped Mr. Cumberbatch, who hated metaphysics at dinner-time. 'Quite! Quite! Quite! Quite!'

'And that again,' began Mr. Puffinlow, 'recalls to me my poor dear Uncle. For he — he was a scientist, you know, a great scientist — was accustomed, so he said, to regard knowledge as an end in itself. The mere discovery of truth, he maintained, produces a satisfaction unrelated to anything else whatsoever.'

'Absurd, Puffin! Quite absurd, my dear boy!' said Mr. Lipscombe, drawing in his lips until his mouth became no more than a slit.

'Well, if you will allow me,' persevered Mr. Puffinlow, 'I will tell you the story of my poor dear Uncle's great discovery. He set himself, you must know, in middle life to demonstrate practically the truth of the theory that you can knock down a bridge with a peashooter. It is something to do, I take it, with the rebound. You fire your first pea, and then, with your second, you catch the bridge on the rebound — the rebound, you understand, from the shock of the first; for every action, as Ariosto discovered, has its equal and

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opposite reaction. Well, if you fire your peas in a certain manner – with a certain specific periodicity, I may say,’ – Mr. Puffinlow blew out his cheeks and looked challengingly from one of his friends to the other – ‘down, eventually, comes your bridge.’

‘All very well in theory,’ barked the Colonel, ‘but for practical purposes try a couple of pounds of dynamite.’

‘Exactly, Colonel! Exactly!’ conceded Mr. Puffinlow. ‘But remember, please, that my Uncle was interested simply in the attainment of knowledge for its own sake; or so, in spite of Lippie here, he supposed. Well, as it chanced, my poor dear Uncle was very fortunately placed as regards the carrying out of his experiment; in fact, I have often wondered since whether it was not the place which first suggested the possibility of the experiment, rather than the idea of the experiment which first . . . er . . . which . . . Whether, in short, the first factor, the prime . . . er . . . What I am trying to say is . . .’

‘Give it up, Puffin! Give it up!’ snapped Mr. Freddie Cumberbatch, uncontrollably irritated. ‘You make me giddy by this waltzing on one leg. The sooner we are through with your story, the sooner we shall be able to give our undivided attention to this Château-Lafite – wonderful, Colonel, isn’t it? Quite wonderful! And just

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the right temperature. The bottle is with you, Puffin.'

'Well, in point of fact,' resumed Mr. Puffinlow, 'at the bottom of a large field on my Uncle's estate – a very large field it was: a twelve-acre field, to be exact – rose a viaduct which carried a railway across the valley. The railway had long been disused. It was part of a scheme to exploit a valuable deposit of fire-clay, but no sooner were the railway and the viaduct completed than they unfortunately discovered – you remember it, Freddie: you had shares in it yourself . . .'

'Let it pass, Puffin. Let it pass. You have said that the viaduct was there. Never mind the how or why, but for God's sake get your Uncle to work on it.'

'Right, Freddie! Right! Quite right! Well, my poor dear Uncle approached the directors and asked them – laying before them, of course, the probabilities, should his experiment succeed – if he might shoot peas at their viaduct. The directors, thinking that he was a harmless lunatic, readily gave their permission, and my poor dear Uncle got to work without further delay.'

'Well, thank God for that, Puffin!' said Mr. Freddie Cumberbatch.

'Yes,' went on Mr. Puffinlow, 'he got to work without further delay. But the job was not so simple as it may at first appear. In the first place,

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a common peashooter, fired by a man, would, of course, be incapable of accurate timing and fine adjustments. Automatic peashooters were needed, you will see at once, which would fire continuously for long periods and at exactly regular intervals – at intervals, moreover, whose timing could be altered by some simple mechanical device; for the question of the speed of firing demanded, in itself, endless and untiring experiment. Again, the question of the place of impact arose. At what spot in the viaduct should the pea be fired? High up? Low down? In the middle? Two-thirds of the way along? Twenty-five twenty-sixths . . . ?

‘In short,’ snarled the Colonel, ‘*when* the devil and *where* the devil!’

‘Precisely, Colonel. To put it generally, *when* and *where*. But that was not all. The pea itself was a tremendous question. Was it to be an Early Pea, the later and larger Marrowfat Pea, the Chick Pea, or perhaps the Sweet Pea? And was it permissible to include beans, which, after all, are a kind of pea: unless, on the contrary, it is the pea which is a kind of bean? And, to go farther, what was to be done about the laburnum, and the acacia, the wistaria, and the locust or carob, which bear flowers suspiciously like pea flowers and subsequently, in fact, produce pods containing seeds so similar to peas that incautious persons have before

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now eaten them as such, in some cases with disquieting consequences? Well, my poor dear Uncle was resolved — true scientist that he was — to leave no stone unturned, or rather no pea unshot, until he had discovered the one whose size, shape, weight, and consistency would have the most deadly effect upon the viaduct. He determined to do the thing thoroughly and on a grand scale — so grand a scale, as it turned out, that of his very considerable fortune two and fourpence halfpenny alone remained at the time of his death. For, in the first place, he set up a little Small Arms factory where peashooters of an infinite variety and complexity could be rapidly turned out, and, in the second place, he turned the rest of his estate into a vast pea-garden in which flourished every imaginable kind of pea and bean, together with vetches, laburnums, acacias, wistarias, carobs or locusts, and innumerable other pea-bearing or quasi-pea-bearing growths. These gardens throughout the warmer months were, to us children — I am speaking of between fifty and sixty years ago — a veritable fairyland. Even the viaduct itself was soon so heavily wrapped and festooned in wistaria that it seemed possible that, even if my Uncle's peashooters should succeed in shaking it off its foundations, it would still be held in position by these powerful growths. In summer-time the scent of the

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place was, as you can imagine, delicious: the more so that my poor dear Aunt (for my poor dear Uncle was married) was devoted to flowers and delighted in filling her fine old house with bowls of the choicest blooms. She had, besides, the happy idea of starting a duck-farm, and many an evening I have sat down, while staying there, to ducklings and green peas unequalled – there is no use in your looking incredulous, Freddie: I say *unequalled* – even by these we are now enjoying. Ah! Happy, happy days! Can you wonder, Lippie, is it surprising, Colonel, that green peas should recall to me my poor dear Uncle? And yet it should rather be my poor dear Aunt that they recall, for my Uncle, great scientist as he was, cared – like Galileo – for none of these things. The ducklings meant nothing to him, and the peas nothing more than the promise of inexhaustible ammunition. He seldom, if ever, came near the fine, flower-scented old house, for he had built himself a bungalow a few yards from the base of the viaduct, in which he took up his permanent abode so as to be perpetually on the scene of his great work. And the great work went on ceaselessly day and night. All night through, the peashooter which was in action at the time clicked uninterruptedly under the supervision of the mechanic on duty: all night through, spent peas dropped like a gentle

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hail from the viaduct to the earth beneath, where they sprouted, flowered, seeded and brought forth ammunition a hundredfold for the great cause, while complicated instruments, whose names it would be useless for me to mention, recorded the smallest movement in the viaduct. So sensitive were these instruments — believe me, Lippie — that the expansion or contraction of the viaduct produced by a change of temperature of one degree was easily detected on a revolving chart, while the settling of a starling on the parapet would be registered graphically in a series of vibrations which looked to us children like a panorama of the Pyrenees.

‘Well, for years nothing of any significance was registered — nothing, that is, which could not be accounted for by temperature, wind, or the visits of birds: and, in point of fact, the first intimation of any success came not from these instruments at all, but from the rough and ready observation of a common rustic. A rather disreputable person, he was. Every evening, for years, he had used a right-of-way which ran through the viaduct field to travel from his cottage to the nearest public-house and, later in the evening, home again. His journey took him past the door of my Uncle’s bungalow, and my Uncle, who was curiously free from class consciousness, was accustomed to pass

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the time of day with him. Well, one morning about ten years after the experiments began, this individual reported to my Uncle that, while making his way home somewhat later than usual on the previous evening, he had been alarmed to observe that the viaduct was oscillating very considerably. When pressed for further details he became confused, but he was able to declare that the oscillation was so considerable that, when he reached the viaduct and attempted to lean up against one of the piers, the pier swung completely away from him and he fell into a heap of peasticks, where he lay until the small hours of the morning, too terrified to move. At this extraordinary piece of news, as you will readily imagine, my poor dear Uncle and the whole staff were thrown into the liveliest excitement. Here, for the first time, was definite evidence of progress – evidence the more valuable that it came from a plain, unsophisticated, unscientific eye-witness who, it was strongly to be presumed, was entirely unprejudiced one way or the other – one in whom it was to the last degree improbable that, as so often happens in the case of the scientist, the wish was father to the thought, or, shall I say, to the observation.'

'And we are expected, my dear Puffin,' asked Mr. Lipscombe with curling lip, 'to take all this seriously?'

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'As you like, Lippie!' replied Mr. Puffinlow. 'Entirely as you like! For the fact remains that exactly eleven days later, at 12.15 a.m., my poor dear Uncle brought the viaduct down.'

Mr. Lipscombe and the Colonel both shot an outraged glance at Mr. Puffinlow, and then, throwing back their heads, shook the restaurant with a volley of derision. But Mr. Freddie Cumberbatch sat smiling and unruffled.

'It is a fact for which I can vouch,' he said, 'that at 12.15 a.m. on August the 13th, 1874, the viaduct came down with a crash. It is true that five years previously it had been condemned as unsafe. The brickwork of two of the piers had developed alarming cracks and no less than five hundred and twenty-five bricks had dropped out of the vaulting.'

'Spare us, Freddie,' piped Mr. Puffinlow, with upturned hands and eyes, 'spare us these tiresome technical details!'

'In any case they do not matter,' pronounced Mr. Lipscombe; 'for the facts remain that Puffin's Uncle fired peas at the viaduct, that the viaduct fell down, and, doubtless, that the Uncle believed that he had knocked it down. We are now perhaps on the brink of answering our original question, namely, whether it is possible to appreciate anything for its own sake, apart from its relation to

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anything else. Pray describe to us, Puffin, the reactions of your Uncle to his discovery. How, exactly, did he display his love of knowledge for its own sake? This, at least, you can tell us.'

'Unhappily not,' answered Mr. Puffinlow. 'The end of my story is almost too tragic to relate. For what actually occurred was that the viaduct came down bang on top of the bungalow, in which, at 12.15 a.m., my poor dear Uncle was innocently sleeping. His death was almost certainly instantaneous, and it is much to be feared that he had not the time to appreciate for its own or any other sake this stupendous mass of knowledge which came upon him – I use the expression in its most literal sense – as a bolt from the blue. He lies, to this day, under the ruins. On the top of them we have erected, out of the actual material of the viaduct, a singularly beautiful Maltese cross, designed by my eldest brother, over which, throughout the summer months, climb the sweet peas which he cultivated so patiently.'

Mr. Puffinlow had finished. During the course of the story the four old gentlemen had dispatched their dinner and now, as they drained their second bottle of '87, they became aware of an increased activity in the restaurant. Through the constantly swinging doors numbers of well-dressed people were streaming into the room.

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'What is the meaning of this, waiter?' asked Mr. Lipscombe.

'Theatre supper, sir. The theatres are just coming out.'

The Colonel took out his watch. It was already a quarter-past eleven.

'Supper?' said Mr. Freddie Cumberbatch, in an ecstatic, flute-like voice, glancing about him excitedly like a fox-terrier to whom one has whispered *Rats!* 'Supper? But what an excellent idea! Why should we not have supper? Waiter, we will take supper. And bring me the wine-list, please!'

